

"Ten Tongues and One Lie: Turco-Roman Relations c. 552-650"

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Introduction

In 627 CE, a nomadic army exploded through the Caspian Gates and into the northernmost lands of the Sasanian Empire (in present day Dagestan and Azerbaijan). Our principal historian, Movses Dasxuranc'i (also called Movses Kagankatvac'i) calls them Khazars, and he may well be correct.¹ But they were certainly a part of the Western Turkic Khaganate, invading at the behest of the great Tong Yabghu Khagan. According to Movses, the attack was exceedingly brutal, with the Turks, in their "universal wrath," slaughtering men, women, and children "like shameless and ravenous wolves."² This was no random attack. It was the opening salvo of a grand invasion, planned in concert by the Roman forces of Emperor Heraclius. In time, this invasion would reverse the course of the brutal war between the Romans and Sasanians, allowing the Romans to reclaim their eastern provinces, for all the good that would do them. After all, shortly afterwards would come another nomadic invasion from the south, ushering in the Caliphates of the Arabs.

The seventh century is among the most pivotal in human history, and the Near East, the crucible of the new Islamic world, has attracted a great deal of study. However, an important player in the drama has too often been ignored – the First Turkic Khaganate. Though the First Turkic Khaganate lasted less than a century, its impact on the Eurasian Steppes, especially those west of the Altai Mountains, was enormous. It is no coincidence these steppes (including modern Central Asia, Southern Russia, and Ukraine) still contain many Turkic-speaking inhabitants. Thus, it is rather unsurprising that this period has attracted its fair share of scholarship, particularly from a philological perspective. As yet, however, most of it has remained separate

¹ Moses, *History*, 2.11; for further examination of the relation between these "Khazars" and the Khaganate, see below.

² Movses, *History*, 2.11.

from historical approaches to the sixth and seventh century Near East, despite the clear historical significance of the Turks. There is still a great deal of debate within the scholarship about the East-West partition of the First Khaganate, which will be explored below. But with or without the support of their Eastern cohorts, the Western Khaganate was more than powerful enough to be an effective Roman ally. For the first time, there was a centralized confederation on the Pontic-Caspian steppes – comparable to those which had existed along the borders of China and Persia. That unprecedented expansion west primed the pump for the greatest revolution of all: the establishment of diplomacy with the Roman Empire.

This alliance bore its greatest fruit in the joint invasion of the Sasanian Empire, but its roots stretch back much further, practically to the moment the Turks arrived on the western steppes. Put simply, the Turks and Romans had a common enemy in the Sasanians. The benefit of an alliance was obvious from the very beginning. The realization of it was not. Certainly, there were a great many embassies and nigh-constant diplomatic chicaneries. However, the simple fact remains that there is no evidence of any military alliance before that fateful attack of 627. If the benefit of an alliance was so clear, then what could be the explanation for its failure to become reality before the seventh century?

To answer this question, a coherent and comprehensible narrative of Turco-Roman relations must first be constructed, beginning with their arrival on the western steppes c. 552 CE and ending with the collapse of the First Khaganate c. 650. The sixth century world that the Turks arrived was dominated by the Romans and Sasanians, and since the reign of Anastasius. Into that powder keg strode a fully formed Turkic empire, intent on carving out its place in what once were Sasanian-dominated regions. The first emperor to seize the opportunity this presented was Justin II, whose mission to the Western Turks met with qualified success, although without

an alliance. But after Justin's reign, Turco-Roman relations soured, reaching a nadir marked by failed embassies and raids on Roman holdings. This state of affairs did not change until the 620s, when the alliance was finally cemented by Heraclius to great success, before the Tang and Arab conquests changed everything.

A few key points emerge again and again from this narrative. First is the continued insistence of the Turkic Khaganate on being treated as an equal empire to the Romans and Sasanians. Perhaps even more remarkable is their success in achieving the closest thing to that acknowledgment the Romans were willing to give, if even for the briefest of moments. The second, closely related point is the high level of diplomatic sophistication evinced by the Khaganate in interacting with the Romans. Given that the Turks cut their teeth interacting with Chinese civilization, this should not be terribly surprising. Still, it is remarkable and clearly came as a surprise to the Romans. That sophistication is useful, considering the third point: the clear expansionist agenda of the Turkic Khaganate. It would be absurd to suggest that there was any complete grand strategy on the minds of the Khagans. However, their obsessions and general aims remain remarkably similar over the timespan – impressive for a characteristically unstable and civil war-prone nomadic empire.

The fourth combines the prior three in stating that the Western Khaganate was unprecedented. Certainly, steppe nomads had played an ever-present role in the Greco-Roman oikumene, from Scythians and Sarmatians to Huns. But none ever matched the same level of sophistication and centralization that the Turks brought to the west. They were every bit the equals of the great settled states, with goals and the ability to achieve them. The only fitting comparison is the Xiongnu, with whom the Romans did not interact in a meaningful capacity. In

itself, the uniqueness of the Turks is worthy of note, but when combined with the importance of the time period it becomes even more pivotal to understand.

The diplomatic interplay between the Romans and Turks was an ever-present factor in the Near East from c. 552 to c. 650, and their alliance played a pivotal role in constructing the settlement which would be toppled by the Muslims shortly thereafter. Thus, the Turkic Khaganate stands at the crossroads of history, worthy of a far greater attention than they are routinely given. In charting their evolving relationship with the Roman Empire, one can see the roots of the world that comes after – the cunning, Byzantine diplomacy, the prevalence of steppe peoples, and the closer integration of the western steppes with the soon to be Islamic Near Eastern world. That world would be inconceivable without the ebb and flow of Turco-Roman relations.

Methodology and Historiography

A reconstructed narrative of the Turco-Roman alliance is not untrod ground. Among the most detailed is that of Harry Turtledove's 1977 account, which focuses on the first phase of the alliance under Justin II and Tiberius. Unfortunately, its age puts it at a substantial disadvantage, as it does not account for many of the developments in both Roman and Inner Asian scholarship over the intervening 44 years. Compounding that issue (and emblematic of its date), Turtledove is exclusively reliant on written sources and tends to let himself be led by their biases, most evident in his uncritical acceptance of Menander Protector's *topoi*-riddled portrayal of Tourxanthos.³ His ultimate conclusion, that the alliance with the Turks "more trouble than it was worth," merely another one of Justin's "follies," is built on these unsteady foundations, and must be reappraised.⁴ And, most fundamentally, Turtledove is working solely from a Roman perspective and thus evaluates only the Roman perception of it.

Fortunately, however, there have also been complimentary approaches from the opposite direction, that is, examining the Turco-Roman alliance from the Turkic perspective. The most notable are those presented in Peter Golden's *Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples* and Denis Sinor's "Establishment and Dissolution of the Türk Empire." Sinor's piece remains the best coherent narrative available, however, he is hampered by many interpretational eccentricities – most notably in his steadfast refusal to match Greek renderings of Turkic names with logical counterparts, often resulting in claims that the Romans were negotiating with underlings, not Khagans.⁵ This results in an unnecessary weakening of the diplomatic contacts

³ Harry Turtledove, "The Immediate Successors of Justinian." (PhD Diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1977), 162-165.

⁴ Turtledove, "Immediate Successors," 166-68.

⁵ Denis Sinor, "The Establishment and Dissolution of the Turk Empire," in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 301-05, 308-10..

between Turks and Romans and is frankly unsupported by the evidence. Much of this is corrected by the brilliant linguistic detective work of Golden, who gives the most reliable set of reconstructed personages available.⁶ Unfortunately, both have the same weakness, namely their being rather short. As a result, both rely on summary and generalization. There is considerable room for expansion on the themes and ideas that they develop, especially when integrated more fully with Roman scholarship.

As with any treatment of diplomatic history, the foundation of this study must come from the written sources. When dealing with the late sixth and early seventh centuries, this necessitates the reliance on a smattering of mostly fragmentary evidence. Fortunately, despite the paucity, what written sources we do have focus on diplomacy to a degree unusual in ancient and medieval history-writing. In part, this can be attributed to many being preserved in the compilations of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, but not all of the sources are found there, and indeed many are not even Greek. Thus, we should rather take the emphasis on diplomacy in the extant sources as a reflection of the times – times in which the intricate diplomatic negotiations of the great empires were rightly considered centrally important to the broader history.

Unsurprisingly, most of our sources from the Roman perspective are written in Greek, although it would be reductive and misleading to simply group these together. In fact, the Greek historical tradition of the period contains two distinct bodies of history. The first and most directly applicable to diplomatic history is the classicizing tradition embodied by writers such as Menander Protector and Theophylact Simocatta. Writing in a strict tradition stretching as far back as Thucydides, these historians emphasize state-level warfare, external diplomacy, and above all the actions of important individuals. Despite the obvious limitations of such an

⁶ Peter Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992), 127-131, 135.

approach, it is these sources that provide us with reliable, foundational insight into diplomatic negotiations, owing to the authors' proximity to the imperial court.⁷ On the other hand are the ecclesiastical historians, much more numerous and often anonymous or pseudonymous. These histories obviously focus more on the affairs of the church, but such a focus entails a bottom-up perspective and a localized history that can often fill the gaps left by the broader classicizing histories.

Most non-Greek sources of the Near East, coming from the Armenian and Syriac traditions, fall into the latter category. These sources become particularly crucial later, as the Greek tradition shrinks. However, even from the beginning, they provide an altogether unique insight into the arena of the Near East, often being more direct witnesses than Greek-writers to the effects of diplomatic ebb-and-flow (as was the aforementioned case with Movses Kaḡankatvac'i). Oftentimes, the proximity to the frontiers ensured that these writers had a closer proximity to the Turks and a greater understanding of steppe nomads in general, a fact that, when combined with the lessened reliance on classical *topoi*, can render them more reliable than Greek writers.

On the subject of the Turks, the written sources applicable to them are of a rather different nature. Unfortunately for posterity, this era's Turks lacked a writing system, with the first epigraphic evidence appearing in the eighth century and manuscripts coming even later.⁸ As shall be demonstrated, the period of these writings is markedly different from the period here covered – so much so that retrojecting these later sources must be done cautiously, provisionally,

⁷ For examples of this proximity, see the biographical treatments in Menander the Guardsman, *The History of Menander the Guardsman*, trans. R. C. Blockley (Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Francis Cairns, 1985), 1-5; and Theophylact Simocatta *The History of Theophylact Simocatta*, trans. Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), xiii-xvii.

⁸ For a concise overview of written Early Turkic, see Golden, *Introduction*, 151-52.

and always with a great deal of supporting evidence. It would be foolish to deny that the lack of written evidence is a problem. We will never hear the Turks of this period truly speak in their own voice. However, a careful examination of external sources can mitigate this problem somewhat. Particularly noteworthy here are the Chinese sources, especially those of the so-called “Standard Histories” compiled in the Tang period, which are generally very concerned with the Turks.⁹ Like the classicizing Greek sources, the Chinese “Standard” or “Orthodox” tradition is a very old tradition that does not lack for *topoi* and limited perspective. But they provide an unmatched insight into Turkic internal politics and tell another half of the story of Turkic diplomacy with settled peoples.

Crucially, however, these written sources cannot and will not be considered in a vacuum. The archaeological record is of extensive usefulness in supplementing and verifying surviving writings. Clearly, archaeology can tell us nothing about the discussions between Roman and Turkic envoys. However, it can tell us a great deal about what they referred to. Archaeology becomes exceedingly important when reconstructing the Turks’ culture and history, given the lack of textual evidence. So too does the distribution of Turkic and Sasanian coins allow for a speculative reconstruction of the changes on the Sasanians’ eastern frontier. Numismatic evidence is also particularly revelatory in uncovering the Turks’ presentation of their universalist ideology and worldview – necessary additions to the rather limited perspective of our written sources. In turn, the written sources imbue archaeology and numismatics with a context and meaning than they would otherwise lack. As such, the synthesis of these two disparate elements can give us a much fuller view of Turco-Roman relations.

⁹ Endymion Porter Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A New Manual* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 818-26.

That spirit of synthesis applies equally to this work's treatment of the historiography – or, more accurately, *historiographies*. Turco-Roman history is truly Eurasian, taken together, the two empires stretch from Spain to Korea. As such, any work that claims to construct a comprehensive narrative of their relations will need to integrate a substantial number of historiographies from across the Eurasian continent(s). With that said, given their centrality to the topic, a few must be given an especial focus. The first is the historiography of the Later Roman Empire. There is certainly no lack of historical writing on the Late Roman and Byzantine world, in spite of the relative dearth of evidence. Indeed, diplomatic history has become increasingly prevalent, often with a particular focus on diplomacy and Roman-Sasanian relations.¹⁰

However, rarely are Turco-Roman relations highlighted as being of particular import in this period, an error that the present work seeks to rectify. Often, they are given a cursory mention, lacking sufficient explanation of their importance. For example, Dignas and Winter's discussion of the Turks simply states that Justin II attempted to secure an alliance with them and moves on, further mentioning the Turks only as a distraction for the Sasanians.¹¹ The later Turkic alliance (or “Chazar” alliance, as they follow Movses and other sources with that incomplete identification) is mentioned only in passing, not as a decisive factor in the last great war of antiquity.¹² Indeed, it is quite rare to see the alliance considered such. The great exception is James Howard-Johnston, who (owing to his familiarity with Armenian sources like Movses) has long championed the Turks as among the deciding factors in the Roman victory.¹³ His

¹⁰ See e.g., *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars, Part II: AD 363-630* ed. Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel N.C. Lieu (London: Routledge, 2002); Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbors and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹¹ Dignas and Winter, *Rome and Persia*, 41-42.

¹² Dignas and Winter, *Rome and Persia*, 46.

¹³ James Howard-Johnston, “Heraclius’ Persian Campaigns and the Revival of the East Roman Empire,” *War in History* 6 (1999): 40-42.

argumentation is very convincing and closely examined below, but it can be expanded and given a great deal of additional context when synthesized with the full history of Turco-Roman relations behind it.

The second body of scholarship is, naturally, the that which studies the Turkic Khaganate itself. Again, there is no dearth of research on this topic (although it is perhaps less well-known than Later Roman history). Mostly, however, the work is being done from a philological perspective, rather than a historical one concerned with constructed narratives. That approach has been exceedingly fruitful and has led to some excellent scholarship that is absolutely foundational for this work. For example, Michael R. Drompp's work in this area has provided as thorough an understanding of internal Turkic affairs as can be expected, a necessity when accounting for their motivations in diplomacy.¹⁴ However, this hyper-focus often comes at the expense of larger-scale, diachronic historical events such as diplomatic narrative.

There are exceptions to the specificity, but often they are surveys which cannot afford to thoroughly examine a specific topic such as Turco-Roman diplomacy.¹⁵ Very often, these works place the First Turkic Khaganate within the broader realm of Inner Asian History (that is, principally, the history of China's northern frontier), as Barfield does in defining the Turks in terms of their relationship with China.¹⁶ That approach is reasonable, valid, and has proven highly fecund. However, this work takes a different tack, in examining the First Turkic Khaganate's affairs outside the Inner Asian heartlands and as a player in world history, using the same methods that have been used in examining Turkic relations with China. In so doing, it

¹⁴ Michael R. Drompp, "Supernumerary Sovereigns: Superfluidity and Mutability in the Elite Power Structure of the Early Turks (Tu-jue)," in *Rulers from the Steppe: State Formation on the Eurasian Periphery*, eds. Gary Seaman and Daniel Marks (Los Angeles: Ethnographics Press, University of Southern California, 1991), 44-115; and Michael R. Drompp, "Imperial State Formation in Inner Asia: The Early Turkic Empires (6th to 9th Centuries)," *Acta Orientalia Academia Scientiarum Hungaricae* 58 (2005): 101-11.

¹⁵ Golden, *Introduction* is a prominent example.

¹⁶ Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 85-127.

hopes to add to the understanding of Turkic and Inner Asian history as well. The relationship with the Romans was crucial to the western part of the Khaganate, and a more thorough understanding thereof holds the promise of better explaining this more enigmatic half.

The revised approach of this work was decisively influenced by the third major historiography, that of the Sasanians. In recent times, Sasanian historiography has been swept by a “reorientation” of the Sasanian world east, emphasizing the importance of the Eastern frontier to an equal if not greater degree than the better-documented Western (Roman) one.¹⁷ Naturally, this would imply a greater level of significance for the Turkic Khaganate in Sasanian affairs than has often been regarded by more Western-centric histories. However, even here, many scholars have not fully accounted for the importance of the Turks. Parvaneh Pourshariati, in her otherwise excellent *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*, largely ignores the Turks in explaining the Sasanians’ demise.¹⁸ Her thesis focuses, convincingly, on the *internal* collapse of the Parthian-Sasanian confederacy.¹⁹ But she unfortunately neglects to account for the presence of an external stressor – namely the Turks – who played a major role in fomenting the collapse of the confederacy she describes.

Despite the many wonderful advances they have made, all three of these historiographies have significant flaws in their treatment of Turco-Roman relations. At the root of the flaws is the lack of significant contact between the works of scholars in these ostensibly separate worlds. The Turco-Roman alliance, at the nexus point of all three, represents a singularly important case in

¹⁷ See, e.g., Khodadad Rezakhani, *ReOrienting the Sasanians: East Iran in Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); *Sasanian Persia: Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia* ed. Eberhard Sauer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); Richard Payne, “The Making of Turan: The Fall and Transformation of the Iranian East in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 9 (2016): 4-41; and Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), the latter of which has an extensive bibliography of Sasanian historiography.

¹⁸ The only major coverage of Turks comes with her account of Bahram Chobin, Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 400-410.

¹⁹ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 2-6.

which they must work in tandem. Thus, a new, thoroughgoing account of the Turco Roman alliance, as this work aspires to be, necessitates an assimilation of these disparate works.

Section One: The Roman “Status Quo” of the Mid-6th Century

In order to understand Turco-Roman relations, it is vital to first establish the status quo – the scene which the Turks burst into when they sent a delegation to Constantinople in 563. The only problem with this is that the 6th century is one of the most dynamic and fluid periods in Roman history, in addition to being fairly well-documented (at least compared to the 5th and 7th). As such, any attempt to summarize the events and draw out general trends and themes will necessarily only scratch the surface. Thus, what follows is only intended as a primer prior to the narrative of Turco-Roman diplomacy, with an especial focus on those elements which will be relevant to the development thereof.

The arrival of the Turks on the Western Steppes corresponds with the terminal period of the reign of Justinian, a period which Michael Maas rather prosaically describes as “disappointing.”²⁰ In a *peripeteia* worthy of Herodotus, the whole world seemed to turn against the regime. Perhaps the most devastating event was the much-discussed plague outbreak of 542, which wreaked havoc on the Roman economy and paralyzed the empire by infecting Justinian himself.²¹ Equally devastating on a personal and political level was the death of Theodora in 548. It is doubtful that the 548-49 conspiracy of Artabanes and his allies (in which a number of Byzantine and Armenian aristocrats plotted to replace Justinian with his cousin Germanos) was unrelated to these weaknesses. Though as Procopius himself admits, the plot “came to nothing,”²² it serves as an illustration of the cracking foundation of the Justinianic settlement. It

²⁰ Michael Maas, “Roman Questions, Byzantine Answers: Contours of the Age of Justinian,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 9-10.

²¹ Much has been written on the plague itself and its consequences. For a good overview, see Peregrine Horden “Mediterranean Plague in the Age of Justinian” in *The Cambridge Companion*, 134-160; for a catastrophist argument for the continuing importance of the plague throughout Late Antiquity, see *Plague and the End of Antiquity* ed. Lester K. Little (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²² Procopius, *Wars*, 7.31.

is telling that this is the first major challenge to Justinian's rule mentioned by Procopius since the Nika Riots of some seventeen years earlier. The 550s continued the trend with an unremitting barrage of natural disasters. In an almost painfully poetic moment, the very dome of the Hagia Sophia, which Peter N. Bell has aptly called "ideology in stone,"²³ cracked and eventually collapsed in 557, according to John Malalas.²⁴

However, it is important not to overstate the bleakness of this period. One must not simply take Procopius at face value, particularly when he claims that a trillion people were killed by Justinian's policy in the same breath.²⁵ Even the plague, as devastating as it was, was probably not the absolute demographic tailspin our written sources might imply.²⁶ The Roman Empire was still the dominant power and Constantinople was still the navel of the world. Particularly from an outside perspective, an alliance with Rome was an incredibly attractive option.

Still, Justinian's western affairs, once the pride of his propaganda machine, had indeed soured. Agathias accuses Justinian of having "wearied of vigorous policies" in his old age and of allowing the legions to degrade.²⁷ Equally likely, however, was that the nigh constant warfare and expansion had sapped the empire itself of strength. The wars with the barbarian kingdoms of the west turned against the Romans, with the desultory warfare in Italy a particularly grisly example. Most strikingly, at least for Agathias, a combined Hun-Slavic raiding party reached the walls of Constantinople, defeated only by Belisarius' emergence from retirement.²⁸ But the most

²³ Peter N. Bell, *Social Conflict in the Age of Justinian: Its Nature Management and Mediation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 319.

²⁴ John Malalas, *Chronicle*, 18, 489.

²⁵ Procop. *Secret History*, 18.

²⁶ For a revisionist reading, relying particularly on archaeology and DNA, see Lee Mordechai and Merle Eisenberg, "Rejecting Catastrophe: The Case of the Justinianic Plague," *Past & Present* 244 (2019): 3-50.

²⁷ Agath. 5.14,1.

²⁸ As narrated in Agath. 5.15-20.

relevant event to the present discussion is the coming of the Avars to the Roman periphery after fleeing the rising Turkic power in the east.²⁹ Though they may not have known it at the time, this marks the first connection between the Turkic Khaganate and the Roman Empire.

The best account of their arrival comes from Menander Protector. The Avars arrived among the Caucasian Alans sometime in the late 550s.³⁰ Almost immediately, the Avars sent an envoy to Constantinople, demanding “the most valuable gifts, yearly payments, and very fertile land to inhabit” in order to render the “invincible” Avars “well-disposed” to the Romans.³¹ In accordance with his earlier policy,³² Justinian agreed to these requests, rather than facing the hostilities of yet another barbarian tribe. Presumably, the gifts were easy enough to manage; the real issue was the land. Justinian attempted to settle the Avars in Pannonia Secunda (roughly the northern part of modern Serbia), probably aiming to play them against the Gepids of the Pannonian Plain, as Blockley intelligently notes.³³ Indeed, Menander praises Justinian for similarly using them to “crush” the other tribes of the region on their way from Alania to the Danube.³⁴

All was not well, however, and the abortive alliance broke down. Menander attributes this breakdown to a personal conference between an Avar envoy and the Byzantine official revealing Avar treachery,³⁵ although one suspects that this is a classic case of a Greek historian reducing broader issues to an individual level. Certainly, Menander also mentions that the Avars

²⁹ See Below, Section Two.

³⁰ There exists some debate over the dating. Compare the dating of 557/8 given in Walter Pohl, *The Avars: A Steppe Empire in Central Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 21-23; against the 559/60 dating given in R.C. Blockley, *The History of Menander the Guardsman* (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1985), 252-53, n. 19. The difference is somewhat trivial for the present discussion, so I shall avoid presenting a specific year(s).

³¹ Men. Prot. Fr. 5,1.

³² C.f. the settling of the Lombards in Procop. *Wars*, 7.34, for example.

³³ Blockley, *History*, 253, n. 28.

³⁴ Men. Prot. Fr. 5,2.

³⁵ Men. Prot. Fr. 5,4.

were dissatisfied with the land offer, preferring a location in Scythia Minor (roughly corresponding with modern Dobruja in Romania and Bulgaria) which was rejected by the Romans.³⁶ Perhaps this disagreement spoiled the alliance. In any case, the alliance collapsed, and Justinian held the Avar envoys as hostages to ensure their remaining north of the Danube. From here on, the Avars remained a liquid, hostile factor on the northwest frontier, until eventually coming to rest on the Pannonian Plain after the removal of the Gepids and migration of the Lombards.³⁷

Several conclusions can be drawn from the Romans' interactions with the Avars. Many are quite general; Walter Pohl correctly notes that the Romans' "procedure was in no way exceptional."³⁸ Thus, the example of the Avars can be used to draw larger conclusions about Roman-Steppe people relations. While there was certainly no prescribed policy towards Steppe peoples, the Romans nonetheless fell back on a number of stratagems when it came to dealing with them. First and foremost was the tendency to play them off each other, in the hopes that doing so would distract from raids on Roman territory and prevent the formation of a larger polity. As a further part of this management, the Romans were highly concerned with controlling the movements of these nomadic groups, often attempting to settle them in particular areas conducive to Roman interest.

Equally important, however, is the fact that these stratagems very often failed, as they did in the case of the Avars. Rather than managing the frontier, Justinian's policies ultimately resulted in the creation of an Avar Empire in Pannonia – a genuine existential threat to the empire – although his death spared him from dealing with the consequences. Nevertheless, the

³⁶ Men. Prot. Fr. 5,4; For the identification of Menander's vague Scythia Minor, see Blockley, *History*, 253, n. 28.

³⁷ For a much more detailed account of the Avars in this period see Pohl, *Avars*, 21-68.

³⁸ Pohl, *Avars*, 22.

Romans will draw from the same playbook when dealing with the Turks, although with very different results. More particularly, in dealing with the Avars, the Romans had unwittingly poisoned relations with the Turkic Khaganate before negotiations had even begun.

It is very difficult to spin the developments western frontier as good. The East, however, was far more ambivalent. The so-called Eternal Peace, signed with the Sasanians in 532, had lasted scarcely eight years. In the summer of 540, the Sasanians invaded Roman Mesopotamia. Procopius attributes the breakdown to the conniving of a Gothic king,³⁹ but the account of a similar near-war caused by a dispute among Arabs makes it seem as though Khusro was spoiling for an excuse to war with the now-distracted Romans.⁴⁰ Initially, that war was indeed disastrous for the Romans, with the sacking of Antioch a particularly damaging blow.⁴¹ However, the war quite quickly turned desultory; despite constant fighting, neither side could gain the decisive advantage. By 545, a truce was signed on the Mesopotamian front, although the war would continue on in Lazica well into the 550s. Finally, a full truce was signed in 557.

The negotiations for a formal peace carried on until 562. Fortunately, a thorough account of that treaty survives in Menander Protector. Central to the treaty is the resolving the disputes throughout the frontier, most notably the fortifications at Daras, which the Persians “shall not complain to the Romans about,” although the Romans were not allowed to station “a large force, beyond what is adequate to the town.”⁴² Most relevant to Turkic diplomacy, the treaty also concerns the movement of traders and merchants across the borders. Crucially, that control of movement equally applies to “barbarian merchants of either state” who “shall not travel by

³⁹ Procop., *Wars*, 2.2-3.

⁴⁰ Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel N.C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II: AD 363-630* (London: Routledge, 2002), 102.

⁴¹ An account of the sack is given in the Syriac *Life of Symeon Stylites Junior* 57, reproduced in Greatrex and Lieu *Roman Eastern Frontier*, 104-05.

⁴² Men. Prot., Fr. 6,1.

strange roads but shall go by Nisibis and Daras.”⁴³ By this provision, trade envoys from, say, the Turkic Khaganate, should have to pass through the entrepôts on the Roman-Sasanian border. Failure to do so would violate the terms of the peace.

It is easy to discount the peace of 562, given that it collapses only ten years later. But it was not simply a piece of paper that both sides planned to disregard the moment a war became advantageous again. As pointed out by Dignas and Winter, the peace of 562 “was a serious attempt to find a comprehensive solution to all controversial topics.”⁴⁴ There was even a provision that gave a complicated process for resolving the sort of border community disputes that are used by “godless men ... [to] provide a pretext for war.”⁴⁵ In order to ensure clarity and avoid misinterpretation, a team of twelve interpreters were assigned to review the translation.⁴⁶ All signs point to the fact that this treaty was intended to last for the fifty years it stipulated. As such, it comes the closest to being the elusive “status quo” for the mid-6th century. That status quo was one of considerable parity between the Romans and Sasanians. The treaty of 562 is clearly a negotiation between two powers on an even par. One year later, the first Turkic delegation would arrive in Constantinople.

⁴³ Men. Prot., Fr. 6,1.

⁴⁴ Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 148.

⁴⁵ Men. Prot., Fr. 6,1; It is unclear whether the cited passage was a part of the treaty or a digression by Menander. For discussion, see Blockley, *History*, 258, n.60.

⁴⁶ Dignas and Winter, *Rome and Persia*, 144.

Section Two: The Coming of the Turkic Khaganate

The Turks first enter the historical record in the mid-sixth century. Presumably, of course, they preexisted this for some time – and much ink has been spilled in determining their origins and *Urheimat*; as Peter Golden notes, it remains an open question.⁴⁷ We can be fairly confident in saying that they were ironworkers (a fact which will become important in their gift-giving) and that they were among the most prominent vassals of their predecessor empire, the Rouran Khaganate; these two factors are likely related, given the importance of iron to warfare.⁴⁸ Practically everything else is up for debate. It may well be, as Golden speculates, that the true ethnogenesis of the Turks came only with the process of state-formation – certainly, this would not be unique in Inner Asian history.⁴⁹

In any case, the leaders of the Turks were the Ashina Clan and the first member of the clan reported in history is Bumin. Under Bumin, the Turks played a leading role in suppressing the internal dissent plaguing the collapsing Rouran Khaganate then under the rulership of Anagui (r. 520-552). According to the Chinese sources, Bumin broke out in revolt from his liege when Anagui refused his request for a royal marriage alliance.⁵⁰ One learns to be skeptical of this sort of personalization in ancient sources, both Chinese and Classical, but the singular importance of marriage-alliances in Inner Asian societies makes it far from impossible. Demonstrative of that fact is the marriage of Bumin to a princess of the Western Wei⁵¹ shortly thereafter. Utilizing the alliance with the Wei and the weaknesses of the Rouran state, Bumin quickly defeated the

⁴⁷ Golden, *Introduction*, 126.

⁴⁸ Sinor, "Establishment," 295-97.

⁴⁹ Golden, *Introduction*, 126-27.

⁵⁰ Drompp, "Imperial State Formation," 103-04.

⁵¹ The Wei were a dynasty of Sinicized clan of the Inner Asian steppes. These events occur during a rather chaotic and dynamic period in Chinese history, the precise narrative of which is outside of the scope here. For an overview of the period with a particular emphasis on Inner Asian relations, see Barfield, *Perilous*, 85-127.

Rouran and rose to supremacy over their lands by 552. Unfortunately for him, he died shortly thereafter.

Roughly contemporary with the death of Bumin, his brother, Ishtemi, began a push into the west. Though the sources report that he was following the fleeing Rouran,⁵² it is a reasonable surmise that he was also motivated by economic factors, given that the west (particularly the region now known as Turkestan – not to be confused with its subdivision, Turkmenistan) contained the main urban centers of the silk trade.⁵³ Whatever the reason, this was a remarkable decision. Prior empires, like the Xiongnu, had developed *influence* in Turkestan, often extracting revenue from local merchant princes.⁵⁴ But they had never directly controlled the western regions; the Turks were the first, and only the Mongols would repeat it. In so doing, Ishtemi put the Turks into direct contact with the Roman Empire, and he is likely the Silziboulos mentioned in the first mission to Constantinople.⁵⁵

However, the expansion of the Turkic Khaganate was soon met by the dominant power already in the region – the Hephthalites. The Hephthalites were themselves a nomadic Inner Asian people, who had built a powerful, Bactrian-centered empire on the eastern borders of Iran and extending as far east as the Tarim Basin.⁵⁶ Fortunately for the Turks, they found a powerful ally in a Sasanian Iran under the leadership of Khosrow I Anushirvan – among the most

⁵² Sören Stark, “Türk Khaganate,” in *Encyclopedia of Empire*, ed. John M. McKenzie et al. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 2129.

⁵³ Golden hypothesizes thus in *Introduction*, 127; see below for the importance of the silk trade to the Turkic Khaganate.

⁵⁴ Barfield, *Perilous*, 48-49.

⁵⁵ Such an identification has been questioned (see Sinor, “Establishment,” 302-03), but Golden argues for the identification persuasively, *Introduction*, 127.

⁵⁶ A full examination of The Hephthalites is outside the scope of this volume. Despite its brevity, the overview offered in Khodadad Rezakhani, *ReOrienting the Sasanians: East Iran in Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 125-146, is the best introduction; B.A. Litvinsky, “The Hephthalite Empire,” in *History of Civilizations in Central Asia*, vol. 3, *The Crossroads of Civilizations AD 250-750*, eds. B.A. Litvinsky et al. (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1990), 135-162, is outdated and short on analysis, but it provides a great deal of useful archaeological evidence.

mythologized and celebrated of all Iranian rulers. It is thus unsurprising that, as Touraj Daryaee notes, “it is quite difficult to determine fact from fiction” in his rule.⁵⁷ This fact is well-reflected in the evidence of the Turco-Sasanian alliance. The sources are unanimous in reporting this anti-Hephthalite coalition, but our most detailed account comes from the *Shahnameh*. Certainly, the source is not without its problems, not least of which is in identifying the Turks as “Chinese,” although the events and name Sinjibu (Ishtemi) clearly mark them as the Western Turks.⁵⁸ However, it more than makes up for its deficiencies in the insights a careful reading could offer.

According to the *Shahnameh*, war broke out between the Turks and Hephthalites when the Hephthalites murdered a Turk ambassador bound for Iran. If this is indeed true, it would be a remarkable demonstration of the proactivity of Turkic diplomacy. Given the fact that we know from Menander Protector that the Turks also initiated contact with the Romans, the idea that they would do the same with the Sasanians is reasonable. It is equally intriguing that the Turks proceeded to war without securing that alliance. Far from the hammer-and-anvil, two-front strategy often presented in the literature, the Turks defeated the Hephthalites on their own at the Battle of Gol-Zarriun and had even reached a peace agreement. It was only after this victory that the Sasanians brought forces into the region, whereupon the Turks beseeched them for an alliance, cemented with the exchange of royal brides. The boundary line seems to have been the Oxus. The *Shahnameh* is explicit in stating that Ishtemi saw his daughter only to the Oxus,⁵⁹ but this could be taken as mere poetic license were it not for solid archaeological evidence for Sasanian occupation up to the Oxus and no further.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 29.

⁵⁸ Rezakhani, *ReOrienting*, 141-42.

⁵⁹ Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. and ed. by Dick Davis (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 805-806.

⁶⁰ Rezakhani, *ReOrienting*, 176-78.

This is a fine story, evinced by its inclusion in the *Shahnameh*, but it also tells us a great deal about Turkic diplomacy more broadly. First, the Turks are the agents in initiating diplomacy – a role which they will continue to play with the Roman Empire and had already played with the Wei. Second is the importance of marriage alliances and gift giving as tools of diplomacy, which, again, was visible with the Wei. Both were basic aspects of Turkic diplomatic language and the diplomatic language of Late Antique Eurasia more broadly, although the Romans will not lack for hang-ups about the former. Third, the Turks defeated the Hephthalites alone and aligned with the Sasanians only for the cleanup operation in partitioning the Hephthalite empire. That might suggest something that might be reinforced by their earlier conduct. Rather than the expected explanation of the alliance as a military function, necessary to defeat an equal or superior foe, the Turks used alliances to build a frontier settlement after the main events of the war – a pattern which will reappear.

Of course, as soon as the Hephthalites were reduced into rump principalities, the Sasanian-Turkic accord collapsed. Their alliance was built on a common enemy, and now that the Turks had come to occupy the same space, the two were natural enemies (although one wonders what the respective royal brides thought of it). More precise narrative detail will be given below, but it suffices for our purpose here to say that after a brief defeat, the Turks pushed into the lands south of the Oxus up to the Iranian Plateau.⁶¹ Certainly by about 580, the Western Turkic Khaganate was established in the shape it would hold until the Tang invasion.

But the Hephthalites were far from the only major conquest of this early period. The Turks also pushed much further west, into the heartlands of the Pontic-Caspian Steppe. Owing to the paucity of evidence – both documentary and archaeological – left in this region, it is

⁶¹ The documentary record is here reinforced by archaeology, see Rezakhani, *ReOrienting*, 176-81.

impossible to establish dates or events with any precision. However, what is clear is that the Turks had established their rule over the Volga regions (with admittedly some resistance) by about 571, giving us a *terminus ante quem* with which to work.⁶² As we already know that the Avars, expelled by and fleeing the advance of the Turks came onto the Pontic-Caspian steppe by 558 at the earliest, we can establish that as a *terminus post quem*.

However, in addressing this issue of the Avars, we have stumbled into one of the great questions of the historiography, which cannot go unaddressed here, seeing as “the Avar problem” will be among the defining issues in Turco-Roman diplomacy. Put simply, the question is: were the Avars who appear in the Caucasus the same as the Rouran overthrown by the Turks? Certainly, the name Avar and its variations were applied to the Rourans,⁶³ and the pattern of an overthrown elite migrating west is one well-established in the Inner Asian tradition. So it should be an easy answer, but it is complicated by the testimony of Theophylact Simocatta. Probably acting upon information given by the Turks themselves, Theophylact reports that the people known to the West as Avars are in fact Pseudo-Avars, wholly different peoples, called the Vara and Chunni, who had stolen the name from the prior overlords of the Turks.⁶⁴ It would be easy to dismiss the excursus out of hand, the product of a negative animus to the Avars at the time of their siege of Constantinople, but, as Walter Pohl points out, his information is far too good to dismiss whole cloth.⁶⁵

Regardless, the tendency has been to disregard Theophylact’s account, given the preponderance of linguistic evidence. In the words of Peter Golden, the leading scholar in the

⁶² As reported in Menander and dated by Golden, *Introduction*, 129-130.

⁶³ Peter B. Golden, “Some Notes of the Avars and Rouran,” in *The Steppe Lands and the Worlds Beyond Them: Studies in Honor of Victor Spinei on his 70th Birthday*, ed. Florin Curta and Bogdan-Petru Maleion (Iași: Editura Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza, 2013), 43-66, provides the best overview of the linguistic evidence.

⁶⁴ Theophylact Simocatta, *History of Theophylact Simocatta*, trans. Michael and Mary Whitby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 188-93, provides the text of the excursus alongside much needed commentary and notes.

⁶⁵ Pohl, *Avars*, 41-42.

field of early Turkic history, “the ‘Pseudo-Avars’ may be safely removed from historical analysis.”⁶⁶ However, scholars like Étienne de la Vaissière and Walter Pohl have rightly modified that argument to include the likelihood that there were indeed non-Rouran elements in the Avars. For one thing, the archaeology does not match, although material culture is not necessarily the best predictor.⁶⁷ More importantly, we also have reports from the Chinese sources that the ruling Rourans actually came to China, rather than launching into a mad dash for terra incognita.⁶⁸ The most likely explanation to account for all of these discrepancies is that the Avars were in fact an amalgam of many disenfranchised groups, *including* some remnants of the Rouran, who took the most prestigious name among them.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity, “Avars” will here refer only to those people who came to rest in Pannonia and “Rouran” to the Inner Asian Khaganate.

Perhaps most interesting, for our purposes, is the fact that it was the Turks themselves who actually caused this whole mess. In their many, many complaints to the Romans about the Avars, the Turks do not refer to them as Rouran, but Uarkhonitai, the name which Theophylact uses as a premise for his excursus.⁷⁰ The Avars are not framed to the Romans as the former rulers of the Turks, but as their slaves, some among the many slave tribes subject to the Khagan. When Ishtemi boasts that he shall follow them, he does so not to avenge their former subjugation of the Turks, but out of outrage that his rightful subjects have left.⁷¹ There are thus two possibilities: either the Turks did not consider the Avars to be the same as the Rouran, or they had a reason to present to the Romans otherwise. It could merely be the case that to admit that

⁶⁶ Golden, “Notes,” 65.

⁶⁷ Pohl, *Avars*, 46-47.

⁶⁸ Étienne de la Vaissière, “Theophylact’s Turkish *Exkurs* Revisited,” in *De Samarcande à Istanbul: Étapes Orientales*, ed. Véronique Schiltz (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2015), 115-126.

⁶⁹ Pohl, *Avars*, 45-47; de la Vaissière “Theophylact’s,” 115-126.

⁷⁰ For an earlier example, see Menander, Fr. 19.1.

⁷¹ Men. Prot., Fr. 4.2.

they were formally subject people would undermine their perceived power. But in any case, the Turks' lack of acknowledgement of the Rouran-Avar connection lets some air out of the theory that their primary motivation was the pursuit of the Rouran.

Regardless of their motives, the Turks had created a genuine Eurasian empire, unchallenged in its scope until the Mongols. What was the Turkic state, so quickly able to become a great power? As is almost always the case, understanding the foreign affairs of the Turkic Khaganate is impossible without knowing its domestic ones. If anything, the necessity is even greater with the Turks, as diplomacy is itself a key aspect of their political system. It is thus fortunate that we have relatively solid evidence for Turkic statecraft and even more fortunate that state formation and maintenance is probably the second most widely discussed and debated issue in the historiography, after ethnogenesis.

Of course, there is another side to that coin – there is a considerable amount of controversy surrounding the Turkic state and Inner Asian statecraft more broadly. Ever since the pioneering writings of Owen Lattimore, the focus of such discussion has been on economics. Lattimore famously defined the Inner Asia-China border more by economic and ecological differences than the power of a given state.⁷² While Lattimore himself did not apply his principle to state-building, Thomas J. Barfield has. On this reading, the nomadic economy is dependent on the settled goods available in a powerful, unified China, states and empires are formed as supratribal units designed to better extract resources from settled peoples – “shadow empires” as Barfield called them.⁷³ That is to say, that the impetus of nomadic (and indeed Barfield suggests

⁷² Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1940, repr. Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 328-34.

⁷³ Thomas J. Barfield, “The Shadow Empires: Imperial State formation along the Chinese-Nomad Frontier,” in *Empire: Perspectives from Archaeology and History*, ed. Susan E. Alcock et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 10-41.

this is also true of non-Inner Asian nomads) comes from external, not internal factors.⁷⁴ The Barfield thesis assumes two things. One: that Inner Asian steppe regions are not economically capable of supporting a self-sufficient state, and two: that a steppe empire can only rise contemporarily with a consolidated Chinese state.

However, a number of scholars, chief among them Michael R. Drompp and Nicola Di Cosmo, have rightly criticized both of these premises, very often using the Turks as the test case. For one thing, there is the obvious fact that the rise of the First Turkic Khaganate does not coincide with a powerful Chinese state; in fact, the moments of the Khaganate's greatest *weakness* coincides with a powerful Chinese State. More damning, however, is the fact that nomadic states were not economically dependent on independent settled empires. Though it can indeed be tempting to be overly schematic in applying Lattimore's ecological dichotomy, there were always agriculturalists living alongside pastoralists throughout much of Inner Asia.⁷⁵ Inner Asian states existing in heavily agricultural areas exhibit the same characteristics as those dependent on pastoralism.⁷⁶ Inner Asian people were not economically dependent on the separate ecology of settled states, but even if they were, as Michael Drompp has pointed out, China was far from the only settled power to exploit – as demonstrated by the westward expansion.⁷⁷ Even urbanization, often considered the ultimate distinction from the Chinese world, is extant in Inner Asia from the beginning, although naturally in a different form.⁷⁸ Clearly, the Barfield model is insufficient.

⁷⁴ Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, 5-8.

⁷⁵ Nicola Di Cosmo, "Ancient Inner Asian Nomads: Their Economic Basis and Its Significance in Chinese History," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 53 (1994): 1092-1126 is dedicated to demonstrating this fact.

⁷⁶ Nicola Di Cosmo, "State Formation and Periodization in Inner Asian History," *Journal of World History*, 10 (1999): 13.

⁷⁷ Drompp, "Imperial State Formation," 104.

⁷⁸ Peter B. Golden, "Courts and Court Culture in the Proto-urban and Urban Developments among the Pre-Chingissid Turkic Peoples," in *Turko-Mongol Rulers, Cities and City Life* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 22-26, for the Turks, see 42-46.

So where does that leave the Turkic Khaganate? In his revised periodization, Di Cosmo places them as the first of his “trade-tribute empires,” that is, an empire whose revenue was drawn both from the collection of tribute and from trade – often more from the latter than the former.⁷⁹ This contrasts with prior “tribute empires” like the Xiongnu and later “dual administration empires” (an integration of sedentary administration and taxation with a nomadic structure) like the pre-Khubilai Mongols.⁸⁰ In many ways, this characterization is accurate. While it might be an overreach to christen an age of Pax Turcica, the Turkic conquest of Eurasia did usher in a period of increased trade.⁸¹ The Turks had an extremely close relationship with the Sogdian masters of the Silk Road, a fact attested nowhere better than in the Sogdian Maniakh’s mission to Justin II. In this and many other cases, the diplomatic activity was inextricably tied with trade concerns, and, as such, Sogdians were principal arbiters. The redistribution and conspicuous consumption of luxury goods received from trade served as a key component in the power of the Ashina Clan.⁸²

However, a reading which focuses exclusively on trade and tribute is insufficient for the Turkic Khaganate. Owing to the Sinological focus of most scholars, the unique contributions of the Western regions have been overlooked. While in the east, the Turks adopted much of the Rouran system, dating back to the Xiongnu, their Western domains had much more in common with the earlier empires of the Hephthalites or the Kushans. Like those two empires, the Western Turkic Khaganate was an incredibly diverse political unit, in which pastoral nomads, Sogdian merchant princes, Iranian aristocrats, and the builders of the Buddhas of Bamiyan coexisted.

⁷⁹ Di Cosmo, “State Formation,” 30-32.

⁸⁰ Di Cosmo, “State Formation,” 29-30, 32-34.

⁸¹ Rezakhani, *ReOrienting*, 176-82.

⁸² Sören Stark, “Luxurious Necessities: Some Observations on Foreign Commodities and Nomadic Polities in Central Asia in the Sixth to Ninth Centuries,” in *Complexity of Interaction Along the Eurasian Steppe Zone in the First Millennium CE*, ed. Jan Bemmann and Michael Schmauder (Bonn: Vor- und Frühgeschichtliche Archäologie Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 2015), 463-502.

Richard Payne has argued convincingly for the creation of a new sociopolitical synthesis in the region, rooted in the Iranian model, which he (following the Iranian sources) calls Turan.⁸³ Fortunately for the Turks, the Hephthalites had done much of the grunt work in building that synthesis, and they had themselves been heirs of Sasanian systems.

Our best evidence comes from Bactria, only conquered by the Turks in the seventh century, but the conditions are similar enough along the Iranian border zone to speculate that similar systems were in place elsewhere and earlier. In Bactria, the Turks adopted the Hephthalite system of a poll tax, *tōg*, and possibly even reintroduced the Sasanian land tax, *uarg*.⁸⁴ From the Bactrian perspective, the transition was rather smooth, merely changing the adjective from *ēbodāl* (Hephthalite) to *khaganag* (of the Khagan). The Turks, as had the Huns and Hephthalites before them, collected these taxes through intermediaries stationed in the cities, again continuing an ultimately Iranian tradition.⁸⁵ It appears, then, that the Western Khaganate had coherent systems of taxation, not tribute or trade, but the orderly, bureaucratic extraction of funds from its subjects.

In addition, the Turco-Sogdian connection went much farther than a simple trade relationship. Indeed, at the beginning of the period the Sogdians were not the great masters of the silk road that they would become. Prior to the Turks, Sogdiana were among many players in Trans-Eurasian trade, certainly a region with increasing potential, but always considered of marginal importance by the empires centered in Balkh.⁸⁶ The sixth and seventh centuries

⁸³ Payne, "Making of Turan," 4-6.

⁸⁴ *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan I: Legal and Economic Documents*, 2nd ed., trans. and ed. Nicholas Sims-Williams (London: Nour Foundation, 2012), 74-77; an excellent synthesis of these documents focusing on the Hephthalites and Turks can be found in Richard Payne, "Making of Turan," 13-15, to which the present analysis owes a tremendous debt.

⁸⁵ Payne, "Making of Turan," 15-17.

⁸⁶ B.I. Marshak and N.N. Negmatov, "Sogdiana," in *History of Civilizations in Central Asia*, vol. 3, *The Crossroads of Civilizations AD 250-750*, eds. B.A. Litvinsky et al. (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1990), 234-38.

witnessed an explosion of the Sogdian economy and urbanization, manifested in the construction of a vast “urban network” throughout the region.⁸⁷ Notably, however, these were not merely gussied-up trade depots. Rather, they represent an extension of the Turanian city-based administration system – the same system used to extract tax through intermediaries.⁸⁸ What is more, the connections between Turk and Sogdian systems ran even deeper – intermarriage was common, which “facilitated [the Turks’] integration into the aristocratic networks of their sedentary counterparts.”⁸⁹ Certainly, this is not enough evidence to suggest that the Turkic state was funded *primarily* with tax, but it does problematize the tribute and trade model of Di Cosmo. If anything, the Western Khaganate starts to look more like a later “dual administration” empire, ruling hand in glove with its settled population.

However, the Western Turks were not only a continuation of the Turanian tradition. The greatest distinction is the Turkic Khaganate’s expansion west. As has been mentioned, precise dates here are hard to come by, but Turkic power had certainly reached the Black Sea by the early 560s. Nearly all of this land was inhabited by nomadic pastoralists, and the prior powers of Turan had shown no interest in them. Why were the Turks interested? If the sources are taken at their word, this is part of the continual pursuit of the Rouran/Avars west. However, this explanation is unsatisfactory given what we know about the Rouran flight hypothesis. More plausible is the idea that the westward expansion arose from the universal claims of the Turk Khagans.⁹⁰ We know so little about the area that any theories are conjecture. It is possible, however, that the expansion was motivated by the desire to bring more nomadic peoples into the

⁸⁷ Étienne de La Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders: A History* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 112-116.

⁸⁸ Payne, “Making of Turan,” 16.

⁸⁹ Payne, “Making of Turan,” 25-26.

⁹⁰ Peter B. Golden, “Turks and Iranians: Aspects of Türk and Khazaro-Iranian Interaction,” in *Turkic-Iranian Contact Areas: Historical and Linguistic Aspects*, eds. L. Johanson and C. Bulut (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), 34-37.

Western Khaganate's fold, of especial importance considering the nomadic structure of the army. Put simply, the more peoples conquered, the more soldiers available.

All that is to say that the Turkic Khaganate was unprecedented – a powerful admixture of diverse resources and revenue streams, drawing on settled and nomadic peoples alike. However, this raises an important question, fundamental to diplomacy and administration alike. How united were the Western and Eastern Khaganates? On the one hand, it may not matter a great deal; the resources of both Khaganates were great enough to stand alone. But on the other, it matters more than any other question about the administration, especially insofar as the relationship with Rome is concerned. It is thus unfortunate that the question is incredibly difficult to answer. Part of the problem is a change over time; the desultory succession crisis which began after the death of Bumin's sons played out between East and West, resulting in a split in 583, warfare, reconsolidation, and a formal split after Tardush's brief reign as Supreme Khagan c. 603. Compounding that problem, however, is the paucity of sources, which makes a definitive answer hard to come by.

As Denis Sinor notes, the tendency in the scholarship has been to emphasize the split between West and East, even before the political split at the very end of the sixth century.⁹¹ That argument is principally based on both the gigantic size of the Turkic Khaganate and the inherent differences between ruling East and West. The Chinese sources make it abundantly clear that there are many divisions within the Turk Khaganate from the beginning, although those divisions are far more numerous than the mere bipartite model.⁹² In this system, the West was ruled by a *yabghu* (or *yabghu khagan*), a position usually taken to be one step down from the supreme khagan. However, these titles are in constant flux, and khagans are also capable of coexisting,

⁹¹ Sinor "Establishment," 305.

⁹² Drompp, Michael R. "Supernumerary Sovereigns," 93-95.

among other seeming absurdities.⁹³ It is thus important not to be overly schematic in divining status and power from titulature, despite the Chinese sources attempts to do so. However, it is very notable that the rulers of the Western Turks retain *yabghu* as their title, even after the seemingly straightforward split of 603. Suffice it to say that the partition of the Khaganate was far from clean, and never rigidly adhered to.

Perhaps an explanation for the confusing and ever-changing governance at the highest levels of the empire can be found in the nature of Turk rule. The principal method of coherence in the Turkic Khaganate was not administrative, i.e. that the supreme khagan sat at the head of a system of leaders, but cultic, i.e. that the supreme khagan was imbued with religious significance. A khagan was a fundamentally charismatic leader, whose power arose from his connection to heaven, as demonstrated by his *qut*, a Turkic word that encompasses concepts like the vital force of rulership and supernatural good fortune.⁹⁴ Even more so than the Khagan, however, it was the Ashina clan themselves who were the charismatic force intimately connected to the Turkic cosmology.⁹⁵ That sacredness was compounded by the possession of a holy place – the *Ötüken Yış* – which demonstrated the *qut*.⁹⁶ Thus, the Eastern Khaganate was always the sacral heart of the Turkic peoples, powerful not because of its power on Earth, but because of its connection to heaven. It is telling that the Western Turks never ceased to send envoys to the East for religious ceremonies.⁹⁷

⁹³ Drompp, “Supernumerary Sovereigns,” 92-107 is an excellent account of just how confusing these titles are.

⁹⁴ Peter B. Golden, “The Türk Imperial Tradition in the Pre-Chinggisid Era,” in *Imperial Statecraft: Political Forms and Techniques of Governance in Inner Asia, Sixth-Twentieth Centuries*, ed. David Sneath (Cambridge: Center for Asian Studies, 2006), 44-46; as noted therein, the term is in many ways equivalent to the Iranian concept of *xwarrah*, and may have been influenced by it.

⁹⁵ Drompp “Imperial State,” 108.

⁹⁶ Golden “Türk Imperial,” 49.

⁹⁷ Sören Stark, “On Oq Bodun. The Western Türk Qaghanate and the Ashina Clan,” *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 15 (2006), 164, n.24.

There is thus a dichotomy at the heart of the West-East division. On the one hand, the political and administrative forces tended to pull the two apart over the era, but on the other, the cultural and religious lifeblood of the charismatic structure held the disparate parts together. As much of a cop-out as it sounds, the best response to these problems is to consider the Western and Eastern Khaganates as differently separated at different times. While the hard split of 603 (or even earlier) still has a place in marking general trends, the degree of partition was motivated by individual khagans and in response to specific circumstances at the time. This is the only model that can account for a Western Khan, Tong Yabghu, who continues the use of *yabghu*, acts entirely separately from the East, and attempts to gain the title of supreme khagan for himself. As such, the degree of separation between east and west will here be treated on an individual level with an appreciation for change over time, insofar as the evidence allows.

Where, then, does that leave diplomacy? As Barfield sagely notes, “Inner Asian Nomadic States were organized as ‘imperial confederacies,’ autocratic and statelike in foreign affairs, but consultative and federally structured internally.”⁹⁸ That general statement bears out in the case of the Turkic Khaganate. Their interactions with the Romans, Persians, and Chinese alike all evince a unified and sophisticated diplomatic presentation, regardless of internal political events. Perhaps it is most telling that the Romans report none of the preceding power struggles, even as the Romans unknowingly traipse right into the middle of them. It is doubtful too that the Sasanians had much of a sense that the Turks were “partitioning” as they sent an army deep into the Iranian plateau.

⁹⁸ Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, 8.

Michael R. Drompp notes that, unlike in many states, foreign diplomacy was a significant tool of state-making and internal cohesion in Inner Asian empires.⁹⁹ This general principle shows nowhere better than in the Turks. After all, the initial rise to power was predicated more on the Turkic ability to negotiate an alliance with a settled Chinese state than pure might alone. So too, the conquest of the Hephthalites was enabled through an alliance of convenience with the Sasanians. For all that the Roman and Chinese sources tend to portray the Turks as simple barbarians, the careful use of diplomacy was as integral to their survival as their ability to conquer a city. It is thus unsurprising that the Turks approached Constantinople first, and not vice versa. The opportunity for an alliance was there, and the Turks had all the tools to forge it. Unbeknownst to the Romans, these were not yet another tribe of long-haired, bow-legged barbarians, but a genuine *empire* which served as the culmination of centuries of developments in Inner Asia. But unbeknownst to the Turks, they had found an ally who would not be won easily.

⁹⁹ Michael R. Drompp "Strategies of Cohesion and Control in the Türk and Uyghur Empires," in *Complexity of Interaction Along the Eurasian Steppe Zone in the First Millennium CE*, ed. Jan Bemmman and Michael Schmauder (Bonn: Vor- und Frühgeschichtliche Archäologie Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 2015), 439-41

Section Three: Turco-Roman Diplomacy in the Time of Justin II

The first alliance with the Turks, commencing under Justin II, is no doubt our best documented, owing especially to the excellent treatment given by Menander Protector. It is thus unsurprising that it is also among the most studied. However, a careful reading of the account of Menander, in conjunction with the many other written sources which touch on it, reveals many facets that have yet gone unappreciated. Although Menander tries very hard to convince his audience of the importance of the alliance and the Romans' commitment to it, the facts he presents simply do not line up with that interpretation. Far from being a strategic masterstroke, using the Turkic Empire to force the Sasanians into a two-front war, Justin II's alliance with the Turks was in fact simply one of many diplomatic maneuvers aimed at escalation, designed more to frighten than to destroy. The inconstancy and haughtiness exhibited by the Roman state here will cast a pall over all future negotiations with the Turks.

The first diplomatic contact between the Turks and Romans seems to have occurred at the very end of Justinian's reign, in 563. Unfortunately, we know next to nothing about this encounter apart from a tantalizingly brief mention in Theophanes the Confessor: "In the same month [July of 563] envoys arrived from Askel, king of the Hermichiones."¹⁰⁰ The Hermichionites have been identified as the "Kirmikhiones" described as an alternative name for the Turks by Theophanes of Byzantium.¹⁰¹ Their "king," Askel, has been subject to a number of readings and onomastic interpretations, none of which are clearly convincing.¹⁰² In any case, the biggest missing piece of Theophanes' account is the purpose of these "envoys." It is not at all

¹⁰⁰ Theoph. *Chronicle* AM 6048.

¹⁰¹ Theoph. Byz, 2.

¹⁰² For example, Sinor, "Establishment," 302 identifies it as a tribal designation; Károly Czeglédy, "From East to West: The Age of Nomadic Migrations in Eurasia" *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 3 (1983): 77 identifies it as another name for Ishtemi.

clear that this was intended as a diplomatic mission or an attempt at an alliance. Certainly, there were no appreciable results of the embassy, and Menander Protector can describe the major embassy of 568 without mention of earlier contacts.

However, the ambiguity does not entirely preclude some speculative conclusions from being drawn. For one thing, it is highly significant that the Turks sent the embassy first, apparently unprompted, as they had done with the Sasanians. Such a proactivity suggests the importance of diplomacy to the Turks in general and the interest in Rome in particular. As has already been observed, the elimination of the Hephthalite threat had ruined the already rather ad hoc Turco-Sasanian accord, and a new stabilizing alliance was clearly needed. This earlier embassy may also account for the seeming ease of diplomacy relayed in Menander's account of the 568 embassy. Despite the generally fragmentary nature of Menander's history, this seems to be a coherent, self-contained narrative, with little room for substantial lacunae. It is entirely possible that Menander is simply eliding many of the details, either deliberately or from ignorance, but his account depicts none of the expected hiccups of a novel relationship (visible, for example, in Justinian's Avar troubles). An earlier, foundation-laying embassy would explain that strange familiarity.

In any case, this earlier embassy could hardly have compared to the embassy of 568. The fullest account of the proceedings is given by Menander Protector,¹⁰³ although important supplements to it are provided by other historians, especially John of Ephesus, Theophanes the Confessor, and Theophanes Byzantinus. According to Menander, the Turks first sent an embassy to the Persians, seeking permissions to sell raw silk within their empire, but Khusro expelled the ambassadors and burned the silk. That first embassy was Sogdian by extraction, under the

¹⁰³ Men. Prot., Fr. 10.

leadership of Maniakh.¹⁰⁴ When Ishtemi (Sizaboulos) heard of the Sasanian rejection, he sent another embassy “since he wished to establish friendly relations between them and his own state.”¹⁰⁵ This time Khusro had them murdered (presumably Maniakh was not among them). It was only after this indignity that the Turks turned to Rome.

This is a fascinating prologue to the Roman embassy, one unattested by other sources, and thereby representing our only real glimpse into the collapse Turco-Sasanian relations. For one thing, it places the blame on Khusro. In itself, that is somewhat suspicious, given both the general tendencies of Roman histories when it comes to “Oriental despots” and the fact that the story most likely came from the Turkic embassy to Constantinople. But, on the other hand, there is nothing to disprove it either.

If indeed Khusro was the primary cause of the alliance’s collapse, one wonders why. Menander reports that one Katulph, a Hephthalite who had betrayed his people to the Turks, convinced Khusro of the Turks’ “untrustworthiness.”¹⁰⁶ However, ascribing these political decisions to a single individual is a fundamental *topos* of classical history, and the tendency of scholars has rightly been to search for a deeper reason. Peter Golden speculates that there might have been a commercial motivation – namely that the Sasanians did not want to grant the Turks entry into their western silk market.¹⁰⁷ However, one wonders whether Khusro would have done so, since the Turks could and indeed did simply take their business to the Romans, who were in the market for new trade route.¹⁰⁸ Rather, it is more likely that the direct impetus for Khusro’s rejection had more to do with the simple strategic reality of the northeastern frontier – with the

¹⁰⁴ Despite Blockley’s description of Maniakh as a turkic name (*History*, 262, n.113), Maniakh has been reconstructed convincingly as a Sogdian one, Golden, *Introduction*, 128.

¹⁰⁵ Men. Prot., Fr. 10.1

¹⁰⁶ Men. Prot., Fr. 10.1.

¹⁰⁷ Golden, *Introduction*, 128.

¹⁰⁸ For the Romans’ rather recent attempts to connect with “Ethiopian” (Aksumite) trade, see Procop. *Wars*, 1,20.1-9

Hephthalites gone, the Turks were obviously the primary rival for the wealthy states of the Oxus river valley.¹⁰⁹ De la Vaissière notes that the rejection of the silk was “a lofty refusal to use the most symbolic fruit of [Turkic] expansion.”¹¹⁰

Whatever the reason, the Turks’ alliance with Sasanians was dead, and the Romans were the natural ally against their newfound enemy. To that end, Ishtemi dispatched Maniakh on an embassy to Constantinople, carrying with him a gift of raw silk and a letter. Speaking to the diplomatic sophistication at the Turks’ disposal, Maniakh evidently performed beautifully, doing “everything according to the laws of friendship.”¹¹¹ Theophanes Byzantinus adds an interesting wrinkle in noting that the Romans presented silk back to Maniakh’s embassy, the Romans having gotten their hands on some Chinese silkworms.¹¹² As shocked as the Turks may have been, the domestic production could certainly not match the quality and quantity of silk from China. Although the presence of silk clearly implies a trade connection, the Turkic embassy also had a diplomatic agenda from the outset, “asked the Romans for peace and an offensive and defensive alliance” and “added that they were also very willing to crush those enemies of the Roman state who were pressing upon their territory.”¹¹³

Fortunately for the Turks, they had come at a perfect time. Justinian had died in 565, and was succeeded by his nephew Justin II, who was of a rather different temperament, one much more favorable for the Turks. As Michael Whitby has noted, “Justin is traditionally judged, and condemned... because of his handling of the empire’s external affairs.”¹¹⁴ As such, his efforts in

¹⁰⁹ Such an interpretation, while rightly still accounting for the commercial importance, is given by de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 228-32.

¹¹⁰ De la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 232.

¹¹¹ Men. Prot., Fr. 10.1.

¹¹² Theo. Byz. 3.

¹¹³ Men. Prot., Fr. 10.1.

¹¹⁴ Michael Whitby, “The Successors of Justinian,” in *The Cambridge Ancient History Volume XIV: Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, A.D. 425-600*, 3rd ed., eds. Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins, and Michael Whitby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 90.

the east have been thoroughly examined, although a full analysis cannot detain us here.¹¹⁵ His policy can be summed up as a rather aggressive one, and, unlike his predecessor, one highly unwilling to spend money on things like tribute payments. Most onerous, in his mind, were the payments to the Persians, which were the most taxing on both the coffers and imperial dignity. As such, he was set against the treaty of 562, and moved almost immediately to subvert it with a new, aggressive posture in Sasanian relations – visible especially in the diplomatic conflict over Suania.¹¹⁶ In this respect, Justin II and the Turks had a mutual enemy, and were thus natural allies.

It is therefore unsurprising that Justin was highly receptive to the Turks' proposal. After practically interrogating the Turks for details about geo- and ethnographic detail,¹¹⁷ Justin, on Menander's account, seemingly embraced the alliance then and there. Presumably to put the final touches on the alliance negotiation, Justin dispatched Zemarchus, his *magister militum per Orientem*,¹¹⁸ to return with Maniakh to Ishtemi's court. Clearly, Zemarchus' extraordinary journey into the heart of Eurasia excited the imagination of Menander and his audience, and the excursus on his mission is rich in ethnographic detail. However, the geography is highly problematic. Establishing an exact itinerary and the precise location of the Turkic court he visited is exceedingly difficult, perhaps impossible.¹¹⁹ This problem is of minimal importance to

¹¹⁵ More thorough analyses of his foreign affairs can be found in Whitby, "Successors of Justinian," 90-94; and, with a particular focus on the Persians, Harry Turtledove, "'Justin II's Observance of Justinian's Persian Treaty of 562,'" *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 76 (1983): 292-301.

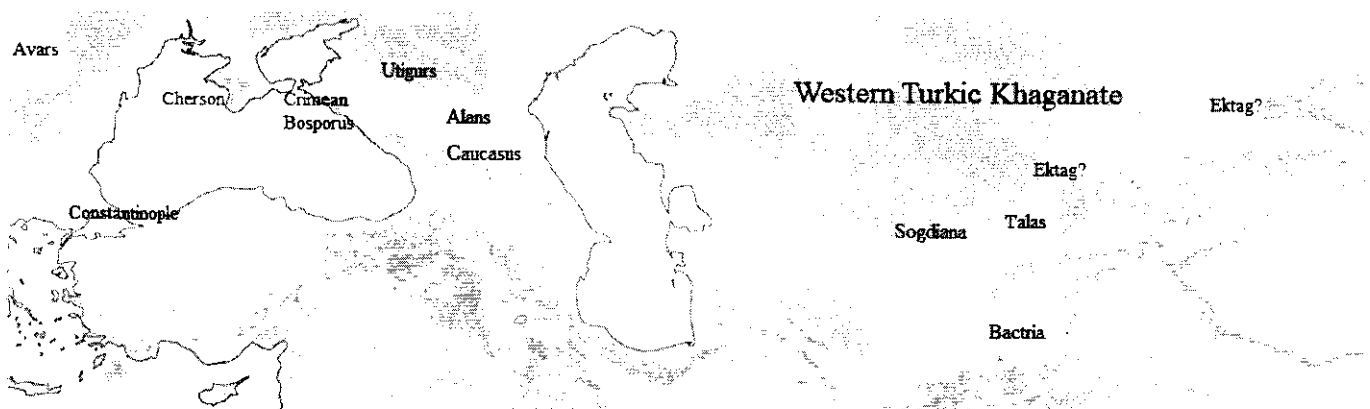
¹¹⁶ Turtledove, "Justin II's Observance," 292-297.

¹¹⁷ A. D. Lee, *Information and Frontiers: Roman Foreign Relations in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 168, rightly notes this as an important example of information-gathering by the state.

¹¹⁸ Blockley, *History*, 263, n. 125.

¹¹⁹ For a good summary of older scholarship, see Blockley, *History*, 264, n. 129; more recent attempts at a reconstruction include Mihaly Dobrovits, "The Altaic World Through Byzantine Eyes: Some Remarks on the Historical Circumstances of Zemarchus' Journey to the Turks (AD 569-570)," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 64 (2011): 373-409; and Golden, *Introduction*, 129-130.

the present examination; it suffices to say that he journeyed very far inland (despite Menander's underselling of "many days"¹²⁰) to a Turkic power center called Ektag.



Map 1: Central and Western Asia at the time of Justin II. Many of these locations are vague and highly speculative (thus the dual Ektags), owing both to nomadism and imprecise descriptions in Menander.

Many themes found in Zemarchus' mission will recur throughout Turco-Roman diplomacy. Zemarchus participated in a shamanic (here loosely defined) purification ritual before being admitted into the Turkic heartland. Most likely, participating in the ritual was a sign of good faith for the Turks, and imbued the proceedings with the same sacral aura that the oaths did to the Romans. When Zemarchus met with Ishtemi in his extravagant, golden furniture-filled tent, the two exchanged diplomatic pleasantries and got down to business – namely, feasting and drinking. This demonstrates an important point about Turco-Roman diplomacy. In many cases, the personal relationship between ambassador and host seems far more important than the heady political negotiations we might expect. Indeed, Menander, otherwise detailed in such areas, relates nothing of the sort. Rather, he emphasizes the building of a friendship between Zemarchus and Ishtemi parallel to that of the Roman and Turkic states. It is possible that, again, the *topoi* of our sources are distorting the picture somewhat. But, more deeply, the sources reveal the underlying thought that empowered that personal relationship. In a society which reduces

¹²⁰ Men. Prot., Fr. 10.3.

complex political phenomena to individuals, of course the main instrument of diplomacy would be through individuals.

Presumably, however, there were also some negotiations sprinkled in between the revelries, and an agreement was struck with apparent ease. As a means of completing the alliance, Zemarchus and his closest associates (including a newly gifted female slave) joined Ishtemi on a campaign against the Sasanians. But on the way, they were met by a Sasanian embassy while encamped at Talas.¹²¹ Given the fact that Khusro had so violently refused Turkic diplomacy, one wonders why he would send an embassy now; Golden is probably correct in seeing the motive more as sabotage of a Roman alliance than a genuine attempt to reopen diplomacy.¹²² John of Ephesus gives further insight into their argument, wherein they claimed that the Romans were merely their slaves, as evinced by the tribute payments stipulated in 562.¹²³ This argument was unsuccessful. All the embassy earned was a place of dishonor and an eventual banishment. With them left the last hurdle to a Turco-Roman alliance, or so it seemed.

After the alliance was concluded, Zemarchus began his return journey home. Narrowly avoiding a Persian ambush in the Caucasus, he returned home to Constantinople in 571.¹²⁴ All in all, then, Zemarchus' embassy was exceedingly successful, and had begun the relationship in the best way possible. Through careful analysis, it also reveals a great deal about the goals and nature of Turco-Roman cooperation. Most importantly, the alliance was directed against the Sasanians, not the Avars. For all that the Turks notify the Romans that the Avars were their rightful slaves and that they will one day reclaim them,¹²⁵ the alliance was never meant for that

¹²¹ This is the same Talas that saw the 751 battle between Islamic and Chinese armies, per Blockley, 265 n. 137.

¹²² Golden, *Introduction*, 129.

¹²³ John Eph. *HE*, 6.12-13.

¹²⁴ John Eph. *HE*, 6.23; Menander adds that he sent a messenger named George a few days ahead on a faster route, Fr. 10.4, but he could not have been *too* far ahead of Zemarchus.

¹²⁵ Men. Prot., Fr. 10.1.

purpose by either side. In fact, Menander does not mention them during the Zemarchus embassy, and the other historians do not mention them at all in this context. Its absence bears a great deal of emphasis here since the Avar problem will become a central one later.

Menander further emphasizes that targeting the Sasanians was Justin's main goal, as "with the Turks attacking from one direction and the Romans from another, the Persians would easily be destroyed."¹²⁶ In fact, he outright states that the alliance with the Turks "most encouraged Justin to open hostilities to the Persians."¹²⁷ Despite that, the *casus belli* for the war came not from the Turks but from Armenia.¹²⁸ It may indeed be the case that, as Turtledove suggests, the Turkic alliance "encouraged Justin II to be more favorably inclined toward war."¹²⁹ However, it bears mention that the alliance had not yet been totally formalized when Justin began to foment rebellion in Armenia – Zemarchus was still on the steppe.¹³⁰ At that point, all the Romans had was a general declaration of peace and friendship. Certainly, it would not be out of character for Justin to act impetuously, having simply assumed that the Turkic alliance would succeed. But it could also well be that the Turkic alliance was not as strong a motivator for Justin as Menander suggests.

Indeed, when the war with the Sasanians broke out in 572, the Turkic alliance mysteriously disappears from Menander's pages, as it does with our other sources for the period. There are no great battles on the Sasanians' northeastern border, and Khusro's attention seems to have been focused entirely on the western front. It is also possible that our sources were simply ignorant of the affairs in the far east, but that alone (especially for the well-connected Menander)

¹²⁶ Men. Prot., Fr. 13.5.

¹²⁷ Men. Prot., Fr. 13.5.

¹²⁸ An in-depth analysis of this flashpoint is to be found in Lee E. Patterson, "Justin II and the Armenian Revolt of 572." *HiMA, Revue internationale d'Histoire Militaire Ancienne* 10 (2021). (forthcoming).

¹²⁹ Turtledove, "Justin II's Observance," 298

¹³⁰ Patterson, "Justin II," (forthcoming) convincingly argues for 570 as the date of the Armenian plea, which brought Justin into planning the revolt.

would indicate the lack of a coordinated alliance. That is not to imply that there was no action between Sasanians and Turks. Given the hostilities established in Zemarchus' visit, it would only be natural to assume that there were Turkic incursions. But the Roman war effort failed, and Justin had a mental breakdown; all the while, the Turks were nowhere to be found.

That lack of mention raises a fundamental question about the 568 alliance – what exactly did it *do*? From the outset, it seems as though there was very little change after Zemarchus' visit. The Turks seem to already have been hostile with the Persians at least by the events at Talas, and there was clearly no coordinated action with the Romans after the outbreak of their Persian War in 572 – otherwise our sources would surely mention it. For their part, the Romans had been inching towards war with the Sasanians since Justin's accession, even without the confidence booster of the Turkic alliance. It may well be that, as Turtledove states, “the Byzantine-Turkish connection was at this time more trouble than it was worth.”¹³¹

There is, however, reason to suggest that the Turkic alliance was little “trouble” at all. Certainly, for Menander, it was a central event, but this may well owe more to his sources than to its importance. For the other major historians of the period, the Turkic alliance is not as prominent a factor, seeing only a brief mention, often alongside other diplomatic embassies.¹³² Zemarchus' journey to the Turkic court was indeed remarkable (although, given the Romans' general lack of geographic information of the steppes,¹³³ it is doubtful he knew it would be so distant until the middle of the journey), but the general principle was not. As *magister militum per Orientem*, negotiating and alliance with barbarians was well within his purview, as

¹³¹ Turtledove, “Immediate Successors,” 166.

¹³² Contrast, for example, Menander's account with the brief account of John Eph. 6.22 or the even briefer one in Theoph. Con. AM 6063.

¹³³ Lee, *Information*, 89-90.

demonstrated, for example, in his successor Justinian's negotiation with the Ghassanids.¹³⁴ As noted by Dobrovits, the language of "peace and alliance" is rare for barbarians,¹³⁵ but Menander presents this as a request from the Turks, not something the Roman offered.

But if the alliance with the Turks was not the silver bullet Menander portrays, what was Justin's purpose in pursuing it? Rather than an altogether unique experiment, it is wiser to view the Turkic alliance as a part of a pattern of diplomatic troublemaking that was the key to Justin's foreign policy. From Suania to Armenia to Arabia, Justin was constantly interfering with local politics and escalating the hitherto dormant conflicts between Roman and Sasanian interests. In so doing, he was working against his despised treaty of 562 and its resultant payments. Forming an alliance with the Turks fit into that mold quite nicely. Simply by accepting a Sogdian trade delegation in Constantinople, he had violated the provision of the treaty forcing barbarian merchants to go through approved entrepôts at Dara and Nisibis.¹³⁶ Further, Justin must have known that the alliance would have sent signals to Khusro that a war was imminent. For this purpose, the fact that the alliance was more real in perception than in "sober fact" does not particularly matter.¹³⁷ All of this fits in exceedingly well with Justin's general policy of escalation on the eastern frontier, likely pushing for a renegotiated treaty without the payments.

If this was his goal, then it worked quite well. As indicated by his numerous attempts to stop the alliance with both diplomacy and murder, Khusro clearly saw a great deal of danger in the possibility. As Patterson notes, the fear of nomads could well have loomed large in his mind, given the defeat of Peroz by the Hephthalites in 484.¹³⁸ In fact, Theophanes Byzantinus directly

¹³⁴ John Eph. *HE* 6.4.

¹³⁵ Dobrovits, "Altaic World," 383.

¹³⁶ Men. Prot., Fr. 6.1.

¹³⁷ Turtledove, "Immediate Successors," 166.

¹³⁸ Patterson, "Justin II," (forthcoming) n. 12.

links Khusro's fears to his expeditions into the Arabian Peninsula.¹³⁹ Justin had successfully applied pressure and had earned an Armenian war for his trouble. However, the Turks had served their role, and the alliance had no particular reason to continue. Justin was more than capable of simply dropping alliances no longer of immediate use. A similar act of inconstancy would later lead to a deterioration of relations with his Ghassanid allies, with quite disastrous results.¹⁴⁰ Regardless of their strength as an empire, the Turks were a part of this game more than a genuine strategic consideration. In that sense, then, there was little difference between them and the other peripheral barbarians, like the Avars or Arabs.

Despite Menander's assurances of Justin's commitment, the events rather seem to indicate a failure on the part of the Romans to follow up on the commitments Zemarchus made. Menander mentions a continuation of embassies from either side, but recounts none in detail, and none seem to have resulted in any major developments of the alliance. The Romans were, of course, rather occupied by the Sasanian war, but it is easy to see from the Turkic viewpoint how uninvested the Romans seemed in an alliance. This is especially magnified if we compare the Roman alliance with the other great alliances in living memory of the Turks, with the Wèi and Sasanians. In both cases, the alliance had been quite rapidly sealed with a diplomatic marriage and coordinated military action had occurred shortly thereafter. Neither of these things happened with the Romans. The Turks had good reason to feel that the Romans were simply leading them on, and as suggested above, they may well have been. It is thus hardly shocking that the relations between the two empires began to disintegrate rapidly.

¹³⁹ Theoph. Byz. 3.

¹⁴⁰ John Epiph. *HE* 6.3-4; Michael Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian: Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 257.

Section Four: The Collapse of the Turco-Roman Accord

Ultimately, it was Justin II's successors who reaped what he had had sown, and the alliance would collapse at the beginning of Tiberius's reign. It did so in suitably dramatic fashion, with the virulent accusations of Tourxanthos recorded in Menander. Thus came the nadir of Turco-Roman relations, the Turks' invasion of the Roman Crimea. Traditionally (including in the Roman sources), conflict over the Avars has been considered the primary reason for this collapse.¹⁴¹ However, this view requires some modification; the contributing factors to the collapse are manifold and not always easily perceptible in Menander's account alone. The question of why this collapse stuck is almost as interesting as the reason for the collapse in the first place, although the sheer paucity of sources (both in general and in reference to the Turks) render a definitive answer impossible. In any case, the collapse ranks, alongside Zemarchus' embassy and the invasion of Transcaucasia, as a moment of signal import, setting the tone for Turco-Roman relations thenceforth.

From the Roman perspective, the collapse of relations with the Turks was incredibly sudden. In the latter years of Justin's reign, relations had continued in some capacity. Menander attests to the presence of 106 Turks in Constantinople, who had been sent, as Menander unhelpfully relates, on "various occasions."¹⁴² Menander gives a list of proper names of the ambassadors they had accompanied without any specification of times or embassies. Blockley suggests that this is probably a summary of another, fuller account of post-Zemarchus Turco-Roman diplomacy, either in a lost fragment of Menander or in his source.¹⁴³ In any case, a basic headcount (in addition to Menander's note that one ambassador went twice) would give a rough

¹⁴¹ See, e.g., Sinor, "Establishment," 304; Pohl, *Avars*, 79-80.

¹⁴² Men. Prot. Fr. 19.1.

¹⁴³ Blockley, *History*, 275, n. 218.

estimate of at least six embassies. The Orkhon Inscriptions, some 250 years later, record that the people came from the nation of “Apurum” to the funeral of Ishtemi in 576;¹⁴⁴ an identification of “Apurum” with “Rome” is tempting, although ultimately unprovable.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, these later inscriptions may well exaggerate or refer to the mission of Valentinus (in which Ishtemi is indeed mourned). It is, however, doubtful that any of these embassies were on the scale of Zemarchus’ or the upcoming mission of Valentinus.

In 576, two years after Tiberius II’s crowning as Caesar, he sent another envoy to the Turks, this one headed by one Valentinus, an imperial bodyguard.¹⁴⁶ This can be seen as part of the general foreign policy aims of Tiberius and his co-regent, the Empress Sophia, which emphasized rapprochement with Roman allies, even those who had abandoned Justin.¹⁴⁷ So too was this matched by negotiations with the Sasanians. It would, however, be too simplistic to wholly contrast Tiberius’ and Justin’s agendas. Even as Tiberius and Sophia pursued a truce with the Persians, they continued to build a force against them, expanding the army and building a coalition of barbarian allies.¹⁴⁸ Reaffirming and redoubling the alliance with the Turks fit well within that plan.

Valentinus was well-qualified for the position. He was that selfsame two-time ambassador to the Turks, and apparently had a substantial entourage at his disposal. In addition, he traveled to the Khaganate alongside all 106 Turks who were in Constantinople.¹⁴⁹ This does read as slightly odd, and Blockley’s reading of the ‘Turks’ abandonment of the city as a grim

¹⁴⁴ E. Denison Ross, “The Orkhon Inscriptions: Being a Translation of Professor Vilhelm Thomsen’s Final Danish Rendering,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London* 5 (1930): 864; The inscription refers to both Ishtemi and Bumin, but if the Apurum are indeed the Romans, it could only be the funeral of Ishtemi.

¹⁴⁵ See, e.g., Pohl, *Avars*, 80 for the identification.

¹⁴⁶ Men. Prot. Fr. 19.1.

¹⁴⁷ C.f. the Turkic mission with those to the Caucasian allies in Men. Prot. Fr. 18.5.

¹⁴⁸ Tiberius’ expansion of the army is attested in John Eph., *HE*, 1.5.; the presence of barbarians is attested by Evagrius, *HE*, 5.14.

¹⁴⁹ Men. Prot. Fr. 19.1.

portent of the coming collapse is understandable, if not provable.¹⁵⁰ At the very least, the fact that every one of the Turks came along is suggestive of the importance of this mission. Sailing across the Black Sea, Valentinus traveled from Bosphorus into Turkic territory, although corruption of the Greek and geographical confusion render a precise itinerary impossible to establish.¹⁵¹ On his way to the court of the Western Yabghu Khagan, he first met with Tourxanthos.

The identity of this Tourxanthos has been debated within the historiography. He is certainly separate from Tardush, the ultimate heir of Ishtemi, as Menander mentions a “Tardou.”¹⁵² Unlike the earlier embassy, Valentinus did not meet with the ruler of the Western Turks. The name Tourxanthos has been identified as a rendering of the title Turk-shad – which is elsewhere attested in the Turkic system.¹⁵³ However, this means that we do not have a personal name (like Bumin or Ishtemi) by which to identify him. According to Menander, Tourxanthos was one of the sub-rulers of the Turkic Khaganate, which had been divided into eight parts after the death of Ishtemi and come under the supreme rule of one “Arsilas.”¹⁵⁴ He was also the son of Ishtemi and thereby brother of Tardush. Valentinus met with Tourxanthos because he was the first stop on his journey to the court of the Yabghu Khagan, suggesting that his power base was in the far west.

That set of attributes does not line up with any figures mentioned in the Chinese sources, the most reliable charts of Turkic history. Denis Sinor points out that our Chinese sources never

¹⁵⁰ Blockley, *History*, 275, n.218.

¹⁵¹ For a very thorough discussion of this section, see Blockley, *History*, 275-276, n. 219.

¹⁵² Men. Prot. Fr. 19.1.

¹⁵³ Gyula Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica, Volume 2 Sprachreste der Türkvölker in den Byzantinischen Quellen* (Leiden: Brill, 1983), 328.

¹⁵⁴ Men. Prot. Fr. 19.1; the identification of Arsilas is another matter entirely, although given the fact that he is never mentioned again in any source and seems to have been replaced by Tardush, it matters little for the present discussion. For an overview, see Blockley, *History*, 276, n. 222.

mention any sons of Ishtemi other than Tardush.¹⁵⁵ However, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and it seems perfectly plausible that a western-based son of Ishtemi (there were likely a great many) could well have escaped the Chinese radar. Furthermore, the succession of Ishtemi is rather underreported. Stereotypically, the succession systems of steppe empires are ill-defined and instigate internecine violence. That formulation would appear in the Turkic state, notably in the contentious succession to Taspar after his death in 581.¹⁵⁶ However, we lack evidence for any such conflict after Ishtemi's death. It rather appears that the transition to Tardush's reign was a peaceful one, with the Western steppes remaining united. And before the succession crisis of 581, Tardush was firmly ensconced as junior to the Eastern Khagan. Tourxanthos thus cannot be taken as a rogue element. It is much more likely that he was executing the foreign policy of his superiors.

Upon his presentation to Tourxanthos, Valentinus naturally indulges in the diplomatic pleasantries of rejoicing the emperor and expressed his desire to "reconfirm just as strongly" the alliance with Ishtemi.¹⁵⁷ In reply, Tourxanthos immediately began ranting about Roman duplicity: "Are you not those very Romans who use ten tongues and lie with all of them?"¹⁵⁸ Valentinus and the envoys were treated to a litany of more specific accusations and outright threats against their lives. No doubt, the aim had now been shifted from negotiating an alliance to getting out alive. On Menander's account, the envoys were only spared due to Tourxanthos' sorrow at Ishtemi's death. The Romans were compelled to slash their cheeks as a symbol of

¹⁵⁵ Sinor, "Establishment," 305; Sinor also alleges that Tourxanthos and Tardush were not brothers (Menander uses the ambiguous "ὄμαιμος"). This is part of Sinor's misguided conviction that Siziboulos (explicitly identified as Tourxanthos' father) and Ishtemi are not to be equated owing to "unbridgeable phonetic distances" which are bridged in Golden, *Introduction*, 127-128.

¹⁵⁶ The best summary is to be found in Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, 134-38.

¹⁵⁷ Men. Prot. Fr. 19.1.

¹⁵⁸ Men. Prot. Fr. 19.1.

mourning,¹⁵⁹ but otherwise escaped unscathed, being sent on to meet with Tardush. However, on the way, the Turks attacked the Roman city of Bosphorus, signaling that the rage of Tourxanthos was not mere bluster. Valentinus and his embassy returned home, having lost the alliance rather than renegotiated it.

Menander's information was good. A.D. Lee reasonably postulates that records of embassies were indeed kept at the imperial capital, and Menander had access to them, as demonstrated by his account of Zemarchus.¹⁶⁰ However, his portrayal of Tourxanthos is riddled with *topoi* that render the characterization quite troublesome; whether originating in those sources or Menander's editorializing, Tourxanthos' perfect adherence to Roman stereotypes raises questions. Above all, he is defined by his *ἀλαζονεία* – his undue arrogance and boastfulness. This is among the most common and widely reviled barbarian characteristics in the Greco-Roman tradition. It is, for example, commonly used by Plutarch in describing barbarians,¹⁶¹ and Polybius sees it as a principal failing of Hannibal.¹⁶² More contemporary to Menander, Procopius and Agathias both attribute *ἀλαζονεία* to the Persians.¹⁶³ Menander's Tourxanthos is also nakedly duplicitous, secretly beginning the invasion of Bosphorus even as he claims that “to lie is alien to the Turk.”¹⁶⁴ Menander has crafted here the perfect representation of a bad barbarian, and for that reason, it is important not to simply take his vision at face value.

The precise historicity of Menander's given speech notwithstanding, his treatment of Tourxanthos' complaints is specific enough to suggest that they are broadly accurate. Menander most heavily focuses on the Avar problem. Tourxanthos apparently considered the Roman

¹⁵⁹ Such a practice is also attested among the Huns by Priscus, Fr. 24.1.

¹⁶⁰ Lee, *Information*, 33-40.

¹⁶¹ For an examination of Plutarch's usage, see Anastasios G. Nikolaidis, “Ελληνικός - βαρβαρικός: Plutarch on Greek and Barbarian Characteristics,” *Wiener Studien* 99 (1986): 229-44.

¹⁶² Polyb. 10.33.6.

¹⁶³ Procop. *Wars*. 1.14.; Agath. 4.8.

¹⁶⁴ Men. Prot. Fr. 19.1.

negotiation and settlement with the Avars to be in a violation of the Turks' sovereignty over them – they are their slaves (*δοῦλοι*).¹⁶⁵ For Menander, Tourxanthos' Avar claim is the supreme example of his *ἀλαζονεία*. Tourxanthos (and by extension, the Turkic state) is claiming sovereignty over a group of people clearly shown to be independent of them. Clearly, this conforms to the *topos* of the arrogant barbarian. However, given the universalist claims of Turkic rule,¹⁶⁶ it could well be a misunderstanding of the Turks' actual ideology. More problematic is the accusation that the Romans had violated that sovereignty in making a treaty with the Avars. Crucially, Tourxanthos does not claim that the Romans have taken the Avars as their subjects. Rather, what he seems to be implying is that the peace treaty between Avars and Romans would prevent the Turks from “tramp[ing] [the Avars] under the hooves of our horses.”¹⁶⁷

One wonders what the logic is here. Menander certainly does not explain it. Presumably, the treaty to which Tourxanthos refers is that of 571,¹⁶⁸ which was apparently a straightforward peace treaty and hostage-taking, although this is a particularly fragmentary section of Menander. Certainly, this would not preclude the Romans from allowing the Turks to conquer them. It seems that Tourxanthos (and by extension, Tardush) would want the Romans to be allies in that conquest. But as demonstrated above, the Avars were not a point of discussion before this point. When Maniakh traveled to Constantinople, he did indeed mention that the Turks considered the Avars their rightful subjects, but only as a response to a direct question; the Avars vanish from negotiations thereafter. The alliance was anti-Sasanian, not anti-Avar. Unfortunately, the fragmentary nature of Menander's history means that the possibility of an account of formal Turco-Roman discussions of the Avar problem being lost cannot be excluded. However, it is

¹⁶⁵ Men. Prot. Fr. 19.1.

¹⁶⁶ Golden, “Turks and Iranians,” 34-37.

¹⁶⁷ Men. Prot. Fr. 19.1.

¹⁶⁸ Following Blockley's dating. *History*, 270 n. 176.

notable that Zemarchus' negotiations occur in a rather clear sequence in one substantial fragment with a beginning, middle, and end. If Menander did record such discussions, it would have made sense for them to occur here.

Why, then, should the Turks expect assistance against the Avars? It seems to be an unreasonable expectation. Perhaps that was the point. This complaint against the Romans was unfair, and the Romans could not reasonably respond to it except by vague groveling, as Valentinus does. Furthermore, the treaty was already signed – there was nothing the Romans could do to change it now. Unlike the other claims, the Avar complaint is grounded in a single specific incident – the negotiation of a treaty – which makes the alliance null and void. It thus provided an expedient escape from the alliance for the Turks, regardless of whether it was actually the biggest issue at play.

What other reason would the Turks have? Menander does provide a secondary complaint, one much more intriguing than the Avars. Tourxanthos alleges that the Romans “take my envoys through the Caucasus to Byzantium, alleging that there is no other route,” in order to deter him “from attacking the Roman Empire by the difficult terrain.”¹⁶⁹ It bears mention that this is apparently true – we have no records of embassies leaving or entering the empire across the Danube. Of course, said route would be rather circuitous and take longer, and the connection to the Eurasian steppes had always been through the Cimmerian Bosphorus and, over land, the Caucasus.¹⁷⁰ But Tourxanthos' point is more about the Romans hiding the route's existence than its practicality. We do not have any evidence for this, but before exonerating the Romans entirely, it must be acknowledged that such manipulations were well within their wheelhouse. As

¹⁶⁹ Men. Prot. Fr. 19.1.

¹⁷⁰ Precedent for this is clear from the third century, see R.C. Blockely, *East Roman Foreign Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1992), 76.

discussed above, this tack was pulled against the Avars to keep them out of Scythia Minor (i.e., the same place the Turks were complaining about the Romans hiding). Control of movement was key to the Romans' strategy against nomads, and it would not be shocking if it were deployed here.

More important than its specific use here, however, is the Romans' general deployment of the strategy. The issues of the Avars and Caucasian deception are just examples of the broader problem – Roman duplicity. Tourxanthos opens with his accusation that the Romans “use ten tongues and lie with all of them.”¹⁷¹ That accusation pertains not only to the Turks, but to “all the tribes.”¹⁷² It is clear that, even without the specific incidents, the Turks had observed Roman alliances with other peoples, including the Avars and Caucasians, and were none too pleased. Correctly identifying the Roman policy, Tourxanthos accuses the Romans of “having flattered and deluded all the tribes with your various speeches and your treacherous designs, when harm descends upon their heads you abandon them and take all the benefits for yourselves.”¹⁷³ Our knowledge of diplomatic activity in the reign of Justin II is spotty – Menander is fragmentary and Theophylact's value depends on his sources.¹⁷⁴ Thus, we can point to few specifics in the Turks' vicinity. Nevertheless, we can observe the deployment of such duplicity in Justin's dealings with the Saracens.¹⁷⁵ It is unlikely that the Turks knew the specifics of this relationship, but they could recognize the pattern made visible elsewhere.

Clearly, the taking of Bosphorus was the greatest manifestation of Turkic displeasure. However, the immediacy of the action – taken, as Menander relates, while Valentinus was

¹⁷¹ Men. Prot. Fr. 19.1.

¹⁷² Men. Prot. Fr. 19.1

¹⁷³ Men. Prot. Fr. 19.1

¹⁷⁴ See Whitby, *Emperor Maurice*, 222-42

¹⁷⁵ John. Eph., *HE*, 6.3-4.

travelling to Tardush's court, may indicate that it was not merely a reaction to the breakdown of relations with Tourxanthos. The armies were evidently already in place well before Tourxanthos gave the order and Tourxanthos himself being in a "war camp."¹⁷⁶ It sounds rather more like the invasion was planned from the beginning, and the meeting with Valentinus merely an announcement of the intention rather than a spur-of-the-moment decision. Certainly, control over the Crimea was advantageous for the Turks – it was, after all, the nexus with the Romans, as demonstrated by Valentinus' journey beginning there. Furthermore, the invasion appears to have been very successful, with the Turks ultimately controlling Cherson (and thus the entire peninsula).¹⁷⁷ An interest in Western expansion was, after all, demonstrated by Tourxanthos. Perhaps the acquisition of this territory was enough to lose the alliance, especially in congress with the knowledge that the Romans make poor friends.

The appeal of western expansion may well have been increased by the political realities on the Turk's Persian frontier. Even the sparse records of the previous period fall off in the period between the arrival of the Turks and the wars of Bahram Chobin, and thus anything said about the Sasanian East at this time is provisional. We can show that the extant coinage indicates strong Sasanian control south of the Oxus in the latter sixth century.¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, the major campaign of Khusro into Armenia contemporary with Valentinus' mission might well indicate a focus on the west that only a secure east could provide.¹⁷⁹ Certainly, there was no mustering of forces on the level seen during Bahram Chobin's war.¹⁸⁰ If indeed Turkic expansion had been

¹⁷⁶ I here follow Blockley's reading that Menander is emphasizing the Turkic preparedness for war, *History*, 276, n. 221.

¹⁷⁷ Men. Prot. 25.2.

¹⁷⁸ Rezakhani, *ReOrienting*, 176-77.

¹⁷⁹ For an overview of this campaign, with relevant primary source excerpts, see Greatrex and Lieu, *Roman Eastern Frontier Part II*, 153-60.

¹⁸⁰ For the best summary, source analysis and bibliography, see Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 397-414.

halted on the Oxus and some settlement reached with the Turks, the alliance with the Romans would have outlived its usefulness, and the west would be the natural target for expansion.

For any of these explanations, it is of the utmost importance not to fall back on monocausality. Particularly for premodern diplomacy, as personality driven as it was, any number of these factors, or other, unknown ones could have offended Tourxanthos and the Turkic rulership. Every one of these factors could well have damaged the relationship beyond repair, and with all of them in play, the deck was stacked against the Romans, even if they had no knowledge of that fact when they sent Valentinus. However, not to overdraw the breakdown of the Turco-Roman alliance into a complete and total breakdown. Certainly, this was not a shining diplomatic moment. However, the Turkic push into the Crimea did not result in an empire-scale war between them. Trade continued. But the alliance, if ever it was truly alive, was now well and truly dead. Furthermore, the close contact of Justin's reign seems largely to have ceased.

In the years between 576 and Heraclius, Roman sources cease referencing negotiations or embassies with the Turks. Theophylact Simocatta records a letter sent by an unnamed Khagan to Maurice. Principally, this letter serves as an excuse for a substantial excursus on Inner Asia; it is here where Theophylact inserts his long, confused explanation of the so-called Pseudo-Avars.¹⁸¹ Furthermore, he provides an equally confused account of an internal conflict in the Turkic state. As tempting as this account is, the tendency in the scholarship has rightly been to ignore it, given its lack of clarity and contradiction with Chinese sources.¹⁸² In demonstration of Theophylact's confusing nature, Michael and Mary Whitby attempt to securely identify these events as the succession crisis of 581, whereas Denis Sinor ascribes them to Tardush's conquest of the east c.

¹⁸¹ Theoph. Sim. 7.7-8.

¹⁸² Sinor, "Introduction," 306.

598.¹⁸³ Neither are wholly convincing. In any case, there is no diplomatic action suggested in this letter. Rather, if indeed it is historical, it served merely as a declaration of triumph.

A similar principle applies to the mention of Turks by Theophanes the Confessor, which comes at the end of his coverage Maurice's war against Bahram Chobin (newly crowned Bahram VI). According to Theophanes, Khusro II sent the Turks serving in the army of Bahram to back to Constantinople, where they came before the emperor.¹⁸⁴ But before this is read as an indication of a persisting alliance, there are a number of factors that must be considered. For one thing, there is simply no way of knowing how precisely Theophanes is using "Turks" here, and, given the ancient sources' tendency to play fast and loose with the term, they very well could not have been the same Turks as the Western Khaganate. What is more, their presence *within* the army of Bahram suggests that they were mercenaries, rather than a separate army of the Khagan; Theophanes does not give numbers for the Turks, so there is no way of knowing their strength. Most importantly of all, Theophanes does give us a reason for their being returned to Rome that has nothing to do with the Turkic Khaganate: they were Christians. Apparently, they had converted after a plague had affected their homelands, tattooing crosses on their foreheads.¹⁸⁵ As tantalizing a clue as that is for the still poorly understood spread of Christianity in Inner Asia, it has little to do with diplomacy between the two nations. As such, this incident can be dismissed as contact between the Roman Empire and the Turkic Khaganate.

But besides these fleeting mentions, the Turks may as well cease to exist in the Roman sources. Why was the collapse under Tiberius permanent? Certainly, the geopolitical favor of the

¹⁸³ Michael and Mary Whitby, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta: An English Translation with Introduction and Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 196-97, n.43; Sinor 306-07.

¹⁸⁴ Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6081; Theophanes apparently lacks a conclusion to the story, merely noting it and moving on.

¹⁸⁵ Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6081.

alliance had not vanished. The Romans continued to war with the Sasanians through 591, with war again breaking out in 602. For their part, the Turks were also in a major conflict with the Sasanians, one in which they were defeated by Bahram Chobin.¹⁸⁶ The conditions thus seem to have been as good in this period as they were in the 560s. And yet, there is no mention of an alliance even being considered by either party.

It again bears emphasis that the Turks were the instigator of the alliance (and, indeed, the actor in its collapse). If the Turks did not send an embassy, the Romans were highly unlikely to instigate an alliance. And the Turks had good reasons not to send an embassy. At the root of all their reasons is the continuing reign of Tardush, which, with some interruptions, ran until the start of the sixth century. No doubt he, being the same khagan who presided over the collapse, would have been particularly ill-disposed to renegotiating one and admitting he was wrong. What is more, Tardush's reign marks the first major interregnum within the Turkic Empire, culminating in his attempt to seize control of the east and elevate himself to the position of senior khagan.¹⁸⁷ Throughout the period, there was scarcely the time to negotiate with the Romans, even if he had wanted to, and in his main target – the east – they were irrelevant. It would take a substantial reversal for the Romans and Turks to ally again.

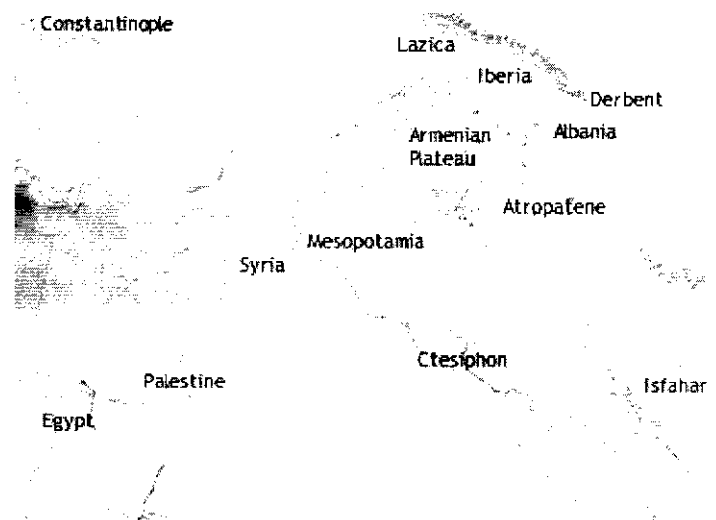
¹⁸⁶ There is no evidence for the Romans having encouraged this attack, as Golden, *Introduction*, 132-133, alleges.

¹⁸⁷ Sinor, *Introduction*, 305-08.

Section Five: Détente, Alliance, and the Last Great War of Antiquity

Given the collapse of Turco-Roman relations, it is remarkable that the recovery of the alliance was as quick as it was. However, careful examination reveals that this second alliance was a different beast entirely. Whereas the previous alliance had ultimately proven to be just another Roman manipulation of a northern “Barbarian” group, this was a true alliance of equals. Surely, Roman desperation lies at the heart of this sea change in Turkic policy, but their desperation proved fruitful. The alliance with the Turks played the decisive role in the final years of the Romans’ great war with Persia, the so-called “Last Great War of Antiquity.” But for all that they had been effective allies in war, the Turks proved to also be a vital part of the post-war settlement forged (principally) by Heraclius, the selfsame settlement which directly resulted in the success of the early Islamic conquests.

The usurpation of Maurice by Phocas had renewed war between the Romans and Sasanians. For the purposes of the present examination, it suffices to say that this war went very poorly for the Romans, and by 620 the Sasanians had captured the whole of the Roman Near East and pushed to the very walls of Constantinople. The Roman counterattack began in 621/22, with the main theater of operations in Transcaucasia.¹⁸⁸ Heraclius won



Map 2: The Near East, c. 628

some victories over the Sasanians, although apparently at considerable cost. But arguably more

¹⁸⁸ The best synthesis of the many primary sources covering this period can be found in Howard-Johnston, “Heraclius,” 1-44.

important than any military action he took at this point, Heraclius focused on a diplomatic charm campaign with the local leaders and peoples on both sides of the Caucasus (our sources are not especially specific geographically), designed, as Theophanes reports, to encourage defections from the Sasanians.¹⁸⁹

It is during this diplomatic campaign that negotiations with the Turks were reopened. Most of the extant sources pay little attention to these negotiations, mentioning only the alliance with the Turks as a *fait accompli*. The great exception is Movses Dasxuranc'i, for whom the Turks are a major villain in his *History of Albania*. Given his importance as a source, Movses bears some assessment here. In reality, Movses was a compiler of previous material, much of which was likely compiled by the time he wrote his history, likely in the tenth century.¹⁹⁰ James Howard-Johnston has convincingly reconstructed a *History of 682*, likely written at or shortly after that time, which serves as the core of Book II.¹⁹¹ It is this source that provides the narrative of the Turks, drawn from "a general overview of war and diplomacy, a vivid local Albanian history written by an eyewitness... and a piece of [the Albanian Catholicos] Viroy's writing."¹⁹² As such, Movses' history is far more reliable as a source than its late date would imply.

However, Movses' account is not without its flaws. It is highly selective – indeed, the dramatic siege of Constantinople is not even mentioned. Since the author clearly had access to the history attributed to Sebeos, it might be surmised that this work was meant to be read in concert, and thus avoided redundancy.¹⁹³ Chronology is a major issue, with chapter 11 (which

¹⁸⁹ Theoph., *Chron.*, AM 6115.

¹⁹⁰ James Howard-Johnston "Armenian Historians of Heraclius: An Examination of the Aims, Sources, and Working-Methods of Sebeos and Movses Dashkurantsi," in *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation*, eds. G.G Reinink and B.H. Stolte (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 49-56.

¹⁹¹ Howard-Johnston, "Armenian Historians," 55-57.

¹⁹² Howard-Johnston, "Armenian Historians," 57.

¹⁹³ James Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World in Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 124.

describes the Turkic invasion of Albania) being incorrectly placed before their alliance with Heraclius.¹⁹⁴ As a direct transmission of the earlier *History of 682*, it maintains the older work's apocalyptic worldview, clearly laid out in that work's preface (wholly preserved in the middle of Movses').¹⁹⁵ The *History* is indeed structured as an apocalypse, starting with a *status quo* of godly Roman rule and ending with the deleterious domination of the Turks and Arabs. As suggested by that description, the view of the Turks is almost comically negative. Thus, many of its descriptions ought to be taken with a grain of salt. Furthermore, many of its most important statements cannot be independently verified from other sources, as can be done with Theophanes, for example. We must, then, tread carefully, and his narrative must occasionally be interrupted with critical commentary.

The Turks first enter the story in 625/26. In that year, Heraclius, already in the Caucasus, decided to negotiate with the Turks, and sent one Andrē to meet with them and “satisfy the thirst of these bestial, gold-loving tribes of hairy men.”¹⁹⁶ Besides the negative animus that will mark the source's treatment of the Turks, this earliest mention reveals one crucial point: in contrast to the earlier diplomatic interaction, the Romans initiated contact. Indeed, these relations are marked by a role reversal of Maniakh's embassy in 568. This time, it is the Romans who came bearing gifts and lofty promises at the Sasanians' expense, and fortunately, the Turks proved equally receptive as had Justin II. Movses describes how a certain “Ĵebu Xak'an” agreed to the proposition with “great eagerness.”¹⁹⁷ Clearly, this is an Armenian rendering of the title Yabghu Khagan, the name for the ruler of the Western Turks – identified as Tong Yabghu by the Chinese

¹⁹⁴ As much is obvious from the text itself, which references Heraclius as being their ally and describes events of Khusro's 38th regnal year, i.e., 628, the year of his murder.

¹⁹⁵ Movses, *History*, 2.9.

¹⁹⁶ Movses, *History*, 2.12.

¹⁹⁷ Movses, *History*, 2.12.

sources.¹⁹⁸ By clear parallels with Theophanes' account (namely at AM 6117), we can also establish him as the same ruler mentioned by Greek sources as "Ziebel."

Troublesomely, Movses (and, indeed, most sources covering this period) does not identify these northern warriors as Turks; rather, they employ the term "Khazars." Some confusion is extant in the scholarship, and an explanation of their identification with the Turks warrants treatment here. The Khazars are the successors of the Turks on the Pontic-Caspian steppes, occupying much of their former role as trade intermediary and third great power in Western Eurasia. As such, many early references, often, as Golden notes, found in Sasanian traditions, are simple anachronisms owing to the sources' later origins.¹⁹⁹ Certainly, the presence of the Khazars looms large over our sources, evinced by the fact that the composition of the *History of 682* was likely interrupted by a Khazar invasion in 685.²⁰⁰ It is thus an understandable temptation for later writers to conflate them with earlier invasions.

However, it is not necessary to discount the identification entirely. After all, Khazar origins are exceedingly mysterious as they ostensibly appear *ex nihilo* after the collapse of the Western Khaganate, with only al-Masudi explaining them as a transformation of the Sabirs.²⁰¹ It is thus far from an impossibility that the Khazars existed as a subtribe within the confederation of the Turks, and owing to simple geography, it would make sense for them to be the main force of the invading army. Such a reading may find support in the fact that Movses does not refer to Tong Yabghu as "King of the Khazars," but as "the king in the north," to whom the Khazars are subjects. As already demonstrated in Tourxanthos, the Turkic state was more than capable of

¹⁹⁸ Sinor, "Establishment," 308-10.

¹⁹⁹ Golden, *Introduction*, 235-36.

²⁰⁰ Howard-Johnston, "Armenian Historians," 58.

²⁰¹ Golden, *Introduction*, 235-36 is a valuable examination of the issues at hand; the sanguine reading offered in the otherwise excellent Kevin Alan Brook, *Jews of Khazaria*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 11-14, is not supported by the evidence.

coordinating foreign affairs with local rulers. Provisionally, we can thus say that these were Khazars, just operating under the broader umbrella of the Turks and Tong Yabghu.

Whatever the specifics of their identity, these Turks were ready to accept the alliance with the Romans, despite the fact that it was they who had caused it to dissolve in the first place. The change requires some explanation. The most obvious shift was a simple generational one. On the one hand, Heraclius and the Romans were willing to reapproach the Turkic alliance for fairly obvious reasons – they had few options left. But so too had the Turks' circumstances changed drastically. Tardush disappears from the historical record after a revolt in 603, succeeded by the rather insignificant Niri and Sheguy.²⁰² The year 618 marks the accession of the altogether more interesting Tong Yabghu Khagan, who would negotiate the alliance with Heraclius. Tong Yabghu's reign was marked by an ambition not seen since Tardush and ending in a similar disaster. He is remembered rather poorly in the Chinese sources, as a ruler who neglected his own people in favor of foolhardy expansion and warfare; most modern historians have concurred.²⁰³ But for the Romans, this was perfect. His desire for expansion was targeted especially at the Sasanians, and he had apparently either forgotten or chosen to ignore the negative animus of Tardush and Tourxanthos.

It is particularly telling that the authors do not mention the previous alliance, as one might expect. If one had solely read these seventh century sources, one would not know that there had ever been a previous alliance with the Turks. It is unlikely that this silence reflects a lack of knowledge – after all, Theophanes does mention the earlier alliance as an important factor in his chronography of 571/72.²⁰⁴ Rather, it would seem that the lack of mention is an

²⁰² Sinor, "Establishment," 305-07.

²⁰³ Sinor, "Establishment," 308-10.

²⁰⁴ Theoph. *Chron.*, AM 6063.

editorial choice, reflective of the prior alliance's lack of relevance to the current one. Support for this theory can be found in the fact that, according to Movses, the Sasanians *did* refer to their now quite distant alliance with the Turks in a bid to stop their attacks.²⁰⁵ But we have no indication that Heraclius did. Given the fact that Khusro's attempt failed drastically, it may well have been wise to judiciously avoid relying on those prior ties.

However, there is evidence to suggest that the Romans had learned from their mistakes. Nikephoros, in his *Short History*, provides an all-important supplement to the alliance negotiations – a diplomatic marriage. According to him, Heraclius' daughter Eudokia was wedded to Tong Yabghu at the confirmation of the alliance.²⁰⁶ At least one author has suggested that this represents an interpolation from a later romance tradition²⁰⁷ (we have already seen the appeal of this foreign marriage motif in the *Shahnameh*). Skepticism is valid, but there is little to suggest that the marriage did not happen, and indeed, the much later *Chronicle to 1234*, which draws on separate Eastern sources, also mentions the marriage.²⁰⁸ If indeed it is true, it evinces the desperation of the Roman position (one can contrast the horror, particularly in the east, at the prospect of Attila marrying a daughter of the emperor²⁰⁹). But for the Turks, diplomatic marriage was standard policy, as seen with the Sasanians and the Wèi. In his appeal to Tong Yabghu, Khusro emphasizes that “we were allied with each other through our sons and daughters.”²¹⁰ It is certainly striking that the most successful alliance with the Romans had this unique, important attribute.

²⁰⁵ Movses, *History*, 2.12.

²⁰⁶ Nik. 12.16-43.

²⁰⁷ Paul Speck, *Das geteilte Dossier: Beobachtungen zu den Nachrichten über die Regierung des Kaisers Herakleios und die seiner Söhne bei Theophanes und Nikephoros* (Bonn: Rudolf Habelt, 1988), 288-91.

²⁰⁸ Howard-Johnston, “Heraclius,” 24, n.75.

²⁰⁹ Mischa Meier, “A Contest of Interpretation: Roman Policy toward the Huns as Reflected by the ‘Honorius Affair,’” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 10 (2017): 42-61.

²¹⁰ Movses, *History*, 2.12.

Alliance secured, the Turks launched a major push into Caucasian Albania, smashing through the Derbent Pass. This army was under the command of Tong Yabghu's "nephew, whom they call Šat' in honor of his princely rank."²¹¹ This is a clear rendering of the well-attested title of *šad*, and, as we have seen with Tourxanthos, a familial relationship is perfectly reasonable. This army launched devastating raids throughout the region and made camp on the Araxes (within striking distance of the highlands) and dispatched an ultimatum to Khusro, demanding his surrender and return of Roman lands, lest he should be destroyed. Khusro sent a reply attempting to denigrate the position of Heraclius, but this failed to persuade them, and they proceeded to meet with Roman forces. Apparently, the Turks withdrew shortly thereafter, returning the next year, now led personally by Tong Yabghu to besiege Tiflis (modern Tbilisi).²¹²

The precise timing here is unclear. Theophanes dates these events to 624, which would render the entire chronology of Movses incorrect. But considering Theophanes' clear willingness to play fast and loose with his chronology,²¹³ the otherwise impressively accurate *History of 682* ought to be trusted over him. Unfortunately, the order of the *History* here is very confused, probably at the hands of a later editor, maybe Movses himself.²¹⁴ Close reading, can, however, reconstruct the true order.

The *History* places the siege of Tiflis in the thirty-eighth regnal year of Khusro, i.e., somewhere between June 627 and Khusro's murder on February 24 or 25 628.²¹⁵ This means that Tong Yabghu arrived after the initial invasion dated 626/27, led by his dispatched *šad* – Movses even describes a scene of Tong Yabghu choosing to lead personally upon his seeing the

²¹¹ Movses, *History*, 2.12

²¹² Movses, *History*, 2.12; for this chronological explanation, see below.

²¹³ Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 279-84.

²¹⁴ Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 111-12.

²¹⁵ Movses *History*, 83; for dating of Khusro's death, see R.W. Thomson, *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos: Part I. Translation and Notes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 85, n. 527.

splendiferous loot.²¹⁶ Thus, there were probably two separate invasions, a theory supported by the withdrawal of the Turks that is placed before the arrival of Tong Yabghu.²¹⁷ Given that the first invasion likely withdrew sometime during 626 (since it began immediately after the embassy of 625/26), it could be that Heraclius' relief of Constantinople was what interrupted the campaign. It is the later invasion whose "universal wrath" is so strikingly remembered in the eyewitness account given in Movses.²¹⁸ The description of their depredations clearly shows signs of the apocalypticism proposed by the preface of the *History of 682*, but it nevertheless demonstrates just how strongly it remained in the minds of the Albanians.

Their return marks another difference from Justin's handling of the alliance: Heraclius personally met with Tong Yabghu. Upon meeting him at Tiflis, Tong Yabghu apparently made a major show of deference to Heraclius by dismounting before him, reported in both Theophanes and Nikephoros as a symbol of Roman superiority.²¹⁹ Theophanes stops here, but Nikephoros, relying on his sources privy to court politics,²²⁰ describes the theatrical diplomacy here in considerable detail. It is here that he reports the betrothal of Eudokia and Tong Yabghu, and the further step of Heraclius' declaring Tong Yabghu his son. In addition, he invited him to remount his horse, bestowed imperial robes and pearls upon both Tong Yabghu and his entourage, and crowned him with an imperial crown.²²¹ As Howard-Johnston notes, these actions are extraordinary, and give Tong Yabghu a near-equality with the emperor²²² – this equal, familial

²¹⁶ Movses, *History*, 2.11.

²¹⁷ *Contra* Howard-Johnson, "Heraclius," 22-26, who attempts to unify the multiple campaigns presented into a single, immediately victorious one. Given that Movses (or, more precisely, the earlier *History*) directly gives years and provides solid explanatory material to connect the events (even if they are presented out of order in extant manuscripts), this reading is unsupported by this source.

²¹⁸ Movses, *History*, 2.11.

²¹⁹ Theoph., *Chron.*, AM 6120; Nik. 12.16-43.

²²⁰ Howard-Johnson, *Witnesses*, 252-53.

²²¹ Nik. 12.18.

²²² Howard-Johnston, "Heraclius'," 24.

language was reserved for the Sasanians, begrudgingly acknowledged as equals by the Romans.²²³ To elevate the Turks to this level of prestige is quite radical, although justified by their military strength. The acknowledgement of the Turks as an equal empire stands in direct contrast to Justin's characteristically more dismissive attitude – in the time of Heraclius, the Turks were truly *allies*, not pawns. That is the single largest point of distinction, and key to understanding why this later alliance succeeded.

And succeed it did, despite minor setbacks. The siege of Tiflis was relieved by Sasanian forces and the Turks and Romans abandoned the siege. But this was a strategic withdrawal more than a retreat. Again, we have a disparity between sources as to what happens next. Movses has the Turks returning home after this siege, but Theophanes reports that the Turks joined on an invasion of Atropatene, leaving only in winter.²²⁴ Given the selectiveness of Movses, and the fact that the reason for the Turks' leaving is their inability to help in Heraclius' invasion of Mesopotamia, which happens after the attack on Atropatene, Theophanes is probably correct here, and Movses has simply elided it. The Sasanians were defeated in this area, and after the Turks had left, Heraclius was free to march into Mesopotamia, fighting the Battle of Nineveh and camping outside Ctesiphon.²²⁵ By the return of the Turks next year, a conspiracy had assassinated Khusro and peace was being negotiated between the Romans and Sasanians.

In many ways, this was Justin II and Ishtemi's dream realized, a joint Turco-Roman assault defeating the Sasanians. There was, however, one crucial difference. Far from the two-front pincer movement Menander portrays as Justin's aim, the successful defeat of Persia came through a coordinated assault in Albania. The evidence does not necessarily suggest that this was

²²³ See below for an example with Heraclius' negotiations with Shahrvaraz.

²²⁴ Movses, *History*, 2.11; Theoph., *Chron.*, AM 6064.

²²⁵ Sebeos offers the best account, without the troubles of absolute chronology, 38. 125-27.

due to a Turkic *inability* to attack from the East. Just twenty years prior, a Turkic raiding army, operating alongside an allied Hephthalite rump state, had penetrated as far as Isfahan, according to Sebeos.²²⁶ This army was defeated by Smbat IV Bagratuni, but the fact remains that invasion of Iran from the East was possible, particularly while Khusro was distracted by his western front. So why attack Transcaucasia?

Practically speaking, this was likely the best option on the table. The sources unanimously emphasize that this was a *coordinated* campaign, with the Turkic invasion being perfectly timed with the movement of Heraclius' troops. Even Movses (or the *History of 682*), who is friendly to Heraclius but hostile to the Turks, admits that the two were acting in concert. Given the sheer distances involved, it is unlikely that any such coordination could have occurred between the two fronts.²²⁷ What is more, there seems to have been an available Turkic army ready to move into Transcaucasia almost immediately – by the chronological reading proposed above, the first Turkic invasion occurred rather shortly after the agreement of an alliance. Movses suggests that the alliance with the Turks was a surprise attack,²²⁸ which would make time even more of the essence. Certainly, the strike was quick enough to preclude any Sasanian response to halt it. These sorts of bold surprise attacks were a hallmark of Heraclius' campaigns, as shown by his movement north to relieve the siege of Constantinople²²⁹ and his later attack on Atropatene in winter.²³⁰

So too were there very good strategic reasons for focusing on Transcaucasia. In analyzing the Persian campaign of Heraclius, Howard-Johnston makes a brilliant point that bears repetition

²²⁶ Sebeos, 28.102; Sebeos calls the Hephthalites "K'ushans," and the involvement of the Turks is reflected by the K'ushans' appeal to the "King in the North."

²²⁷ See Lee, *Information*, 128-42 for an overview of information transfer with northern barbarians, which, with Persia being an enemy and thus difficult to pass through, the Turks would have been.

²²⁸ Movses, *History*, 2.12.

²²⁹ Howard-Johnston, "Heraclius'," 19.

²³⁰ Lee, *Information*, 93-94, explains the unusualness of this winter campaign.

here. By seizing Transcaucasia, the Turks and Heraclius had opened up and threatened the central Iranian highlands – lands ultimately more important to the ruling classes of the Empire than Mesopotamia, the traditional target of Roman attacks.²³¹ It can also be added that control of the Araxes would threaten Persarmenia, which served as the main staging ground for Sasanian invasions into Roman territory.²³² In one fell swoop, then, Heraclius and the Turks had threatened the very heart of the Sasanians and deprived them of their means of fighting back. The degree to which this was a conscious decision is, of course, unknowable. Given the importance Heraclius placed on securing allegiances in the region, it is a fair assumption that he understood some of its strategic value.²³³ Tong Yabghu's strategy is much more difficult to reconstruct, although his personal presence south of Caucasus is certainly suggestive of an interest in the region.

Regardless of Heraclius and Tong Yabghu's perception of that strategic value, it worked. The murder of Khusro was fomented by the very same aristocratic families threatened by the Turco-Romans on the Iranian Plateau – as much is stated by our best sources on Iran, Sebeos and al-Ṭabarī.²³⁴ As is their wont, the sources primarily ascribe varying, overly personal motivations for this coup, but Parvaneh Pourshariati has convincingly merged these accounts into a comprehensible reading that supports her broader thesis of the influence of Sasanian-Parthian noble families. The precise details need not detain us; it suffices to say that a number of these families (mainly the Ispahbudhān, Bagratuni, and Nimruzi), with power bases on the Iranian Plateau and Armenian highlands, conspired to overthrow Khusro, beginning with Zād Farrukh's

²³¹ Howard-Johnston, "Heraclius'," 41-42.

²³² E.g., Khusro's invasion of 603, Sebeos, 106-110.

²³³ Howard-Johnston, "Heraclius'," 36-39.

²³⁴ Sebeos, 129; al-Ṭabarī, *History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume V, The Sasanids, The Byzantines, The Lakhmids, and Yemen*, trans. C.E. Bosworth (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 379, 381.

rebellion c. 626/27, apparently before the “climactic” Battle of Nineveh.²³⁵ Certainly, this built on the centuries of tensions so masterfully outlined in the rest of her volume. However, Pourshariati has overlooked the immediate trigger.

A surface reading can show that the most substantial change in the war at this point was the entry of the Turks into Albania, and by syllogism alone causation may be ascribed. But we can go further. Two of the parties most complicit in the immediate coup²³⁶ were those most directly imperiled by the Turkic invasions. The Ispahbudhān under Zād Farrukh, were based in Atropatene (Azarbāyjān)²³⁷ which, as we have seen, was being attacked by Turco-Roman forces. Varaztirots’ Bagratuni (son of the Smbat who had fought the earlier Turkic invasion), ruling in Armenia, was also in the direct path of the Turks, as their later invasion confirms. Given the paucity of sources, this reading can only be taken so far, and the Nimruzi, based in Sistan were apparently motivated by Khusro’s turn against their leader Mardanshah.²³⁸ But the Turks are a common denominator here, and, by compromising the security of their domains, likely played a central motivating role in the nobles’ coup, and therefore the surrender of the Sasanians.

The exact peace treaty at the end of the war does not survive. A Menander-esque account may well have been preserved in the official history of the campaign written by George of Pisidia, but none of our extant sources reproduce it.²³⁹ Certainly, it specified the return of the formerly Roman provinces occupied by the Sasanians, but almost universally (likely following

²³⁵ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 149-60.

²³⁶ As outlined by Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 152-55; the involvement of the Mihranids comes mostly after the deposition, and her accounting for their part is less convincing, considering that the idea of a rebellion by Shahrvaraz has been convincingly repudiated by David Frendo, “Byzantine-Iranian Relations before and after the Death of Khusrau II: A Critical Examination of the Evidence,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 14 (2000): 27-45

²³⁷ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 129, 149-153

²³⁸ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 157-58.

²³⁹ As outlined by James Howard-Johnston, “The Official History of Heraclius’ Persian Campaigns,” in *The Roman and Byzantine Army in the East*, ed. Edward Dąbrowa (Krakow: Drukarnia Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1994), 57-87.

Heraclius' lead, given his later pageantry), the sources are far more concerned with the return of the True Cross than any political ramifications on the Romans' eastern frontier.²⁴⁰ Specifics are thus difficult to come by. However, we can draw broad narrative strokes of the negotiations. Immediately after the murder of Khusro, his son and successor Kavad sent a letter, allegedly preserved in the *Chronicon Paschale*, suing for peace.²⁴¹ However, Shahrvaraz, leader of the occupying Sasanian army now stationed in Alexandria, refused to abide by the truce.

Heraclius thus began negotiations with Shahrvaraz – negotiations which would result in an alliance between emperor and ambitious general. Heraclius could thereby ensure the removal of the occupying army without undue bloodshed and Shahrvaraz could use Roman forces to defeat his enemies in Ctesiphon.²⁴² Nikephoros again mentions a marriage alliance, this time between the daughter of Shahrvaraz and Heraclius' son; Shahrvaraz's (Christian) son was also made a patrician.²⁴³ A further addition is found in the Syriac *Chronicle of 724*, not without problems, but still invaluable and generally trustworthy.²⁴⁴ The anonymous chronicler claims that the Euphrates was the agreed upon boundary between the Romans and Sasanians.²⁴⁵ Some historians have rejected this, seeing it as impossibly conciliatory, given Heraclius' position of power.²⁴⁶ However, Howard-Johnston's argument, which posits that Shahrvaraz simply could not politically afford giving these lands to the Romans, is most convincing.²⁴⁷ It might also be added that Shahrvaraz was in a particularly precarious position owing to his being from outside the House of Sasan – a fact which rendered him inherently illegitimate.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁰ E.g., Theoph., *Chron.*, AM 6120; Ch. Seert 93; Sebeos, 131; Nik. 18.

²⁴¹ *Chron. Pasch.* 735-7.

²⁴² Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 177-178.

²⁴³ Nik. 12.16-83.

²⁴⁴ An excellent assessment of the source may be found in Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 59-66.

²⁴⁵ *Chr.* 784, 147.18-24.

²⁴⁶ See, e.g., Greatrex and Lieu, *Roman Eastern Frontiers*, 226-27.

²⁴⁷ Howard-Johnston, "Heraclius'," 27-28.

²⁴⁸ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 179-83.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his illegitimacy, Heraclius was clearly willing to go to significant lengths to ensure the success of his new ally. Indeed, he sent a great number of troops to his aid in subduing the forces of Ardashir III.²⁴⁹ Taken together, it appears as though the peace with the Sasanians was not a punitive measure so much as a decisive end to the conflict. Much like the Treaty of 562, the Romans were willing to make territorial and imperial concessions to ensure the continued security of the east. Indeed, according to the often-hyperbolic *Chronicon Paschale*, Heraclius had made repeated attempts at peace, even at the expense of becoming a tributary state of the Sasanians.²⁵⁰ Likely, this is an exaggeration, but it seems to strike a true note of his commitment to ending the war.

For all that we do not know about the Romans' peace with the Sasanians, the Turks' is obscurer by several orders of magnitude; in fact, it is entirely unclear if there was one. There is no indication that they were present at the negotiations, either with Kavad or Shahrvaraz. Most of the major sources cease mentioning them after 628, save, again, Movses Kagankatvac'i. Movses paints a picture of continued Turkic occupation of Albania. The new *shad* led a number of expeditions throughout Transcaucasia, including the successful siege of Tiflis. Curiously, Movses dates these attacks to 629, ostensibly after the Romans had negotiated a truce. His chronology can be off, but there is no reason to question him here. This could well indicate that whatever settlement was reached by the Romans did not apply to the Turks. Clearly, however, the Turks had set up shop in Albania, as is indicated by the rather lengthy interlude where Viroy visits the *shad* and reaches a *modus vivendi* between occupiers and Albanians.²⁵¹ Further establishing a post-truce dating, Movses relates an attempt by the newly crowned Shahrvaraz to

²⁴⁹ Sebeos, 129-30.

²⁵⁰ *Chron. Pasch.* 707-709.24.

²⁵¹ Movses, *History*, 2.14; the fuller implications of Turk occupation will be explored below.

stop the Turkic expansion in the region. However, after a classic Parthian feint by the Turks, his army was utterly crushed and their horses mockingly disfigured.²⁵² Thence, the Turks were free to “[advance] through the passes of the three kingdoms of Armenia, Georgia, and Albania.”²⁵³ Only the collapse of the Khaganate repulsed these invaders.

It has been the tendency in scholarship to divide the continuing Turkic warfare from the Roman settlement with the Sasanians, even proposing that the Turks were breaking with imperial policy.²⁵⁴ At most, Howard-Johnston has proposed that part of the agreement with Shahrvaraz was giving him “a free hand to deal with the Turks.”²⁵⁵ However, the presence of the Turks can, in fact, be squared with Heraclius’ policy. His main goal was indeed peace, but it was peace for the Romans. That goal is rather well-served by continuing warfare in Persia. The Turks provided a wonderful distraction for the Sasanians, and their occupation of Transcaucasia prevented a Sasanian attack on Roman territory. After all, the ostensible agreement of a Euphrates boundary did put the Sasanians within striking distance of Antioch and the Roman East.²⁵⁶ The continual presence of the Turks in Transcaucasia could serve as an effective counterweight – the forces of the Turks hanging like a Sword of Damocles over any attempt to move south of them. Thus, the Turkic occupation of Albania and expansion into Persarmenia may have given Heraclius the confidence to make these terms.

Through his alliance with the Turks, Heraclius had managed to transform the darkest moment of Roman history into an age of tremendous promise. By 630, the Roman position of superiority was now firmly established over the Near East. On the other hand, the Turks had

²⁵² Movses, *History*, 2.16.

²⁵³ Movses, *History*, 2.16.

²⁵⁴ See, e.g., Greatrex and Lieu, *Roman Eastern Frontier*, 226.

²⁵⁵ Howard-Johnston, “Heraclius,” 28.

²⁵⁶ Greatrex and Lieu, *Roman Eastern Frontier*, 227.

been handed the keys to the kingdom of Albania and had a clear route of expansion in Transcaucasia. Times were rarely better for the allies. With the benefit of hindsight, the irony is palpable. In fact, the settlement so carefully constructed was a paper tiger, a fact which would soon be cast into high relief by the invasions of two new empires: the Muslims and the Tang. But, as with the treaty of 562, knowledge of this period's end should not lead us to discount its importance. Even without the coming of Islam and Tang imperialism, the three main players had been fundamentally changed by this last great war of antiquity, and the Turco-Roman alliance was directly at its epicenter.

Section Six: Tang Invasion, Islamic Conquests, and the End of the First Khaganate

The ultimate end of the Turco-Roman alliance came neither from the Turks nor the Romans. It came from the total redefinition of Eurasian dynamic, spurred by two great imperial conquests on either side of Asia – the early Islamic conquests and the expansion of Tang China. The Turkic Empire, both east and west, collapsed entirely, falling into disorganization and Tang hegemony. So too does this mark the end of the Sasanians, the great enemy of the alliance. While the Romans did not vanish, the amputation of its wealthiest provinces resulted in a redefinition of their empire into one that is fundamentally outside that which is presented here. The present examination shall make no attempt to detail the elusive and controversial early Islamic conquests nor the better-documented Tang expansion. Rather, it will explain in detail how these events ended Turco-Roman cooperation and examine the lasting impact of the alliance on this pivotal period.

The first hints of the coming collapse came not from the west, but from the east. Owing to the nature of the present discussion, little attention has hitherto been paid to the changes in China and the Eastern Khaganate. A short, context-providing retrospective is thus in order. As a direct response to the depredations of the Turks, China had witnessed a realignment of their political system, first under the Sui dynasty and, after their collapse, the Tang. These new dynasties were led by aristocratic families of the Northern frontier and had thus deemphasized the Confucian values of the earlier Han dynasty in favor of a more heavily militarized, steppe nomad-like political system.²⁵⁷ This blend was not new, but its control over a united China was.

²⁵⁷ Barfield, *Perilous*, 139-143; any such argument for the fluidity of the Inner Asian frontier is ultimately sourced from Owen Lattimore's seminal *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*; for a modern detailed treatment of cultural and institutional melding on the Northern frontier, see Jonathan Karam Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580-800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

At first, the Eastern Turks were all too happy to raid and profit from the instability the establishments of the Sui and Tang caused. However, after the consolidation of Tang control, an equally powerful empire was on their southern frontier; the Eastern Turks, racked by civil war, were conquered by Emperor Taizong (who proclaimed himself the “heavenly khagan”) in 629.²⁵⁸

For all that scholars have often tried to distance the Western Khaganate from the Eastern, their histories proved to be inextricably entwined in this period. Tong Yabghu seems to have maintained friendly relations with the Tang, being potentially complicit in their conquest of the East (or at least enabled it via inaction). It is perhaps easy to see why: with their removal, Tong Yabghu was ostensibly the unchallenged master of the steppes. But as we have seen, Movses reports the withdrawal of Turkic forces from Transcaucasia shortly after Shahrvaraz’ accession, most likely placing it in 630.²⁵⁹ The “brigands” that Movses mentions seem to refer to the revolt that swept through Tong Yabghu’s realm, reported in the Chinese sources.²⁶⁰ In a rare concordance, Movses and the Old Tang Annals both ascribe the collapse of Tong Yabghu’s reign to his overambitious expansionism and neglect of his own people.²⁶¹ After all, his reign had seen a major expansion of Turkic power, including a push past the Khyber Pass into Gandhara.²⁶²

But nowhere is his expansion better documented than in the Caucasus, particularly in Albania. Geographically speaking, steppe nomads taking an interest in the plains of Albania is hardly surprising, given its suitability to pastoral nomadism; a similar interest would result in its settlement by Turks under the Seljuqs, thereby leading to modern, Turkic-speaking Azerbaijanis. And, as evinced by Movses’ preservation of Catholicos Virov’s account, the Turks were in

²⁵⁸ Barfield, *Perilous*, 145.

²⁵⁹ Movses, *History*, 106.

²⁶⁰ Sinor, “Establishment,” 308-310.

²⁶¹ Movses, *History*, 106, Sinor, “Establishment,” 309.

²⁶² Golden, *Introduction*, 135.

Albania to stay. Movses has the Turks, under his unnamed *shad*, issue an ultimatum demanding submission from the Albanians and when they do not receive a reply, the Turks begin to ravage the countryside. It was only through the sage efforts of Viroy (compared directly to Moses in delivering his people²⁶³) that the Albanians supplicate themselves to the Turks and reach a *modus vivendi*. Clearly, this is an account ripe for self-serving manipulation (part of the narration is in the first person), and, given the general anti-Turk animus of the *Chronicle* into which it was inserted, their savagery may well be exaggerated.

More interesting is the quite generous accommodation reached between the Turks and Albanians. The dissimilarity of Turkic reasonableness displayed here contrasts sharply with their portrayal in the rest of the work, which may itself indicate its historicity. Furthermore, Movses describes the presence of *tuduns*,²⁶⁴ a well-attested Turkic title for a tax collector.²⁶⁵ And as the presence of tax collectors suggests, this seems to have been a permanent incorporation into the Khaganate. Indeed, as a reparation to the country that he had despoiled, the *shad* offers to “repay you twofold in man and beast,” on the condition that he can “rest [his] army within your borders.”²⁶⁶ He goes on to respect the Lenten fast and offer the Albanians bread in place of meat at the feast confirming their submission. It is far from shocking that this would be negotiated with the local Catholicos, and the respect that the *shad* shows likely indicates an attempt to fold him into Turkic administration.

If the Chinese sources are to be believed, the flip side to this expansion into settled areas was a neglect of the nomadic subjects who served as the core of his empire.²⁶⁷ Given the extreme

²⁶³ Movses, *History*, 94.

²⁶⁴ Movses, *History*, 101.

²⁶⁵ Golden, *Introduction*, 135.

²⁶⁶ Movses, *History*, 100.

²⁶⁷ Golden, *Introduction*, 135.

paucity of corroborating evidence, this cannot be confirmed, but we have no reason to disbelieve it. Apparently dissatisfied, the Karluks (a subject tribe) launched an open rebellion, and much like Khusro II, Tong Yabghu was assassinated by other, presumably sympathetic elements in his capital. Thence came a spiral of ephemeral khagans and the complete collapse of central khaganal authority. A number of subject tribes broke off altogether, including the Khazars on the Pontic-Caspian Steppe. Those who stayed reorganized into a much looser, bipolar confederacy known as the On Oq (ten arrows), which was steadily picked at by the Tang for the remainder of the century.

The Roman alliance was clearly an enabler of the expansionist policies of Tong Yabghu, and thus contributed directly to the collapse of his rule. However, the Tang role in the collapse of the Western Khaganate ought not be understated. The formal conquest of the west was much, much slower than the sudden overthrow of the Eastern Khaganate, stretching out over a half-century and remaining partially incomplete at the rise of the Second Turkic Khaganate in c. 682.²⁶⁸ But their influence was felt long before. The Chinese sources imply that many of the Turkic tribes not incorporated into the Tang administration fled west, presumably moving into Tong Yabghu's land and under his control.²⁶⁹ Doubtless this was a destabilizing factor in a system already straining under the pressure of expansionism and an unbalanced nomad/settled equilibrium. In line with traditional steppe policy, the Tang also supported many rebel groups that arose after Tong Yabghu's assassination, furthering its decline.²⁷⁰

In any case, the collapse of the Turks had left the Romans without a potential ally in the coming conflict with the new power of Islam. The ever-controversial details of the early Islamic

²⁶⁸ Barfield, *Perilous*, 145-47.

²⁶⁹ Barfield, *Perilous*, 145.

²⁷⁰ Golden, *Introduction*, 236.

conquests cannot be fully examined here.²⁷¹ It can at least be said that by Heraclius' death in 641, the Romans (or now, if one prefers, Byzantines) had lost their territories south of the Taurus to the Muslims. In explaining the Romans' loss to the Muslims, Walter Kaegi aptly describes them as "not in a state of collapse," but "fiscally, psychologically, and militarily unstable and potentially volatile."²⁷² The Muslims arrived precisely at a moment of Roman vulnerability after the peace agreement with the Sasanians. However, many of the mistakes and insufficiencies in the defensive policies, most notably an unwillingness to leave fortifications and gain initiative, were visible much earlier, notably in the Persian invasions in the 610s.²⁷³ These weaknesses of the Roman military system were compensated for by the Turks in the last great war of antiquity, but without their assistance, those weaknesses were laid bare before the Muslim armies.

But recent events did play a role in the weakness of the Romans in the face of the Muslim invasion. After his Turk-assisted victory, Heraclius felt much freer to demobilize his forces, reducing the size of the army ready to face the imminent Muslim invasion.²⁷⁴ So too had the massive ceremonial of the True Cross's return proved an incredible expense for a Roman financial apparatus already reeling.²⁷⁵ Heraclius can hardly be condemned for his lack of omniscience – there was, after all, no reason to believe that a new major threat would appear in the East. Regardless, these policies did contribute to Roman unreadiness to face Muslim armies. Again, the alliance with the Turks allowed Heraclius to claim a military victory despite

²⁷¹ Though an admittedly sanguine reading of the available evidence (and by now quite old), the standard base narrative of the conquests remains Fred M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); the best account from a Roman perspective is Walter E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); from the Sasanian is Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 161-281; all contain vital appraisals of sources and relevant bibliographies.

²⁷² Kaegi, *Byzantium*, 46.

²⁷³ Kaegi, *Byzantium*, 262-63, 274-78

²⁷⁴ Walter E. Kaegi, *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 221-24. Kaegi, *Byzantium*, 39-43 gives a good, though necessarily imprecise estimate of the forces.

²⁷⁵ Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 221-22.

fundamental, systemic issues at the heart of his empire. That victory allowed for the pursuit of policies which would prove detrimental in the coming years.

Furthermore, the Turks' invasion and brief occupation of Sasanian territory had a deleterious effect on their resistance to Muslim armies. The timing here is even more difficult to establish here than in the Roman empire, and the challenge to the consensus by Pourshariati (who places the initial Muslim conquest contemporary with the Byzantine renewal) has thrown the whole affair into disarray.²⁷⁶ If Pourshariati is correct, this would place the Turkic attacks in Transcaucasia as similarly contemporary. In any case, according to Movses, by the time the Sasanian forces from Albania and Transcaucasia were called to arms, the Turks were gone.²⁷⁷ But the Turks' influence would continue to be felt long after. If the Turkic conquest was even half as apocalyptic as Movses portrays, it would be reasonable to suggest that Transcaucasia's military power was somewhat sapped. Most importantly, the break between various noble families spurred on by the Turkic incursion proved to be a decisive factor in the Sasanian's defeat – and indeed their greatest victory was a rare occasion where they managed to work together.²⁷⁸ Regardless of dating, Turkic influence was felt during the Islamic conquests.

Does that mean that the Turco-Roman alliance and its collapse *caused* the early Islamic conquests? Of course not. Monocausality, always an oversimplification, ought to be wholly disregarded in the case of the Islamic conquests, where the extant evidence arguably does not give enough information to draw even fallacious conclusions. Nor does everything in the early seventh century need to be twisted and manipulated into a teleological ramp-up to the most significant event therein. Explaining the Islamic conquests is rather a process of illuminating

²⁷⁶ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 161-281.

²⁷⁷ Movses, *History*, 109-10; James Howard-Johnston, "The Late Sasanian Army," in *Late Antiquity: Eastern Perspectives*, eds. Teresa Bernheimer and Adam Silverstein (Exeter: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2012), 113-115.

²⁷⁸ Namely, the battle of the Bridge, chronicled in, Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 214-19.

some of the innumerable contingencies which contributed to its success. And the Turkic alliance is one of those contingencies, as is its collapse. Indeed, as we have seen, it may well have been a very important one. Perhaps the most illustrative approach, if appropriate, is to imagine an alternative hypothetical in which the Turks had never joined the Romans in invading Persia, or one in which they had remained in Transcaucasia during the climactic fighting. Both cases would assuredly alter the course of the conquests.

Conclusion

Just as we began with Movses' account of the Turkic attack, so too shall we conclude with it. Movses most likely compiled the final version of his history some time near the end of the tenth century, long after the collapse of the Western Khaganate.²⁷⁹ Even the original historian of 682 was apparently far enough from the Turks to remember them solely as Khazars. Yet they both chose to devote substantive portions of their work to the history of the Turks in Albania, because it was impossible to fully recount their histories without it. That suggests something which has become exceedingly apparent over the course of this analysis: the importance of Turco-Roman relations to the events of the late sixth and early seventh centuries. Most notably, the Turks lay directly at the epicenter of the collapse of Justinian's peace with the Sasanians and the final victory over them, their influence bookending the period.

Thus, the Turco-Roman alliance finds its place as a crucial part of the final century of antiquity. But even without that pivotal role, the Turco-Roman alliance provides much insight. Analysis of the (comparatively) well-documented alliance with the Romans allows for the best glimpse at the goals and motivations of the Turks, particularly the peculiar and evasive Western Khaganate. In addition, it charts an evolution of Roman foreign policy, from one which was derisive and dismissive of the Turks to one in which they were treated as equals. Bridging the vast differences in government and culture, the Turks and Romans found a middle ground, where Romans could participate in Turkic institutions and, eventually, Turks in Roman ones. The alliance was perhaps a victim of its own success – having created for itself the very conditions for its downfall. However, that hardly means that it failed, or that it had no lasting impact to be accounted for.

²⁷⁹ Howard-Johnston, "Armenian Historians," 43.

Further, a careful reconstruction of Turco-Roman relations opens a number of exciting possibilities for future research. An examination of cultural factors, such as the Turks' and Romans' perceptions of each other, might be reconstructed in parallel to the political narrative. Equally illuminating would be this narrative's integration into a broader synthesis including either Rome's earlier contacts with Inner Asian steppe nomads, later contacts with Turkic successor states, or both. The preceding investigation has concentrated on the Romans' evolving relationship with the Turkic Khaganate, mentioning events in the Sasanian world only when relevant to Rome. However, there is a possibility of reconstructing Turco-Sasanian relationship more precisely with the knowledge gained from examining its events as reflected in the Roman sphere. By that same token, a study taken more completely from an Inner Asian point of view may find an increased role for the Roman alliance in understanding the 'Turks' internal history. Comparative studies with the more heavily studied relationship between the Turks and China will also be illuminating.

If there is a single theme that ought to emerge in continuing scholarship, it is a further integration between the often-separate historiographies surrounding the settled Near Eastern world and the Inner Asian steppe peoples. For the most part, scholars of the Near East have been content either to ignore Inner Asia entirely, or at best have relied on broad-strokes syntheses rather than fully engaging with the vibrant body of scholarship. Obviously, the rigors of discipline and the limitations of human beings somewhat moderate the ability of scholars to easily travel between these worlds. However, if the preceding work has demonstrated anything, it is that a closer integration is not only fruitful, but *necessary* for fully understanding the events in the Near East.

Most importantly, this examination has allowed the First Turkic Khaganate to emerge as a powerful political force in the Near East. Throughout the surveyed period, they have clearly demonstrated their agency in their relationship with the Romans; they remained strikingly consistent in goals and aims and possessed the means of accomplishing them. It is hardly a coincidence that, in covering the Turco-Roman alliance, it has been necessary to mention most of the most significant events of the period. Why? Because those events are intertwined with the actions of the Turks in general and the Turco-Roman alliance in particular. That strikes back at the Roman-centric, Iran-centric, and anti-nomadic biases which have often relegated it to a tertiary role. Those biases emerge naturally from the sources, but a careful reading thereof has demonstrated the insufficiency of that model. Even the Romans themselves, so dismissive of the Turks in the beginning, were compelled to acknowledge a parity between the two empires in the time of Heraclius. In moving forward with the study of the Late Antique Near East, it is time for scholars to do the same.

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